

What human beings call the Little Ice Age occurred between the mid-eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. Gnomes name that period the Long Cold.

S. E. Wilder, *Woodland Gnomes: Their Habits and Habitat*

In the aching winter wind of Aeidfjord and through the piercing clouds of icy snow that raged across the cliffs, a white hare named Tornear dodged and sprinted. Her body was warm and her paws beat the snow with ancestral ease. She knew just one thing: a redhat was in trouble.

She had seen him and fled. Had he told her to run? Maybe she had gone on her own. She could not remember. Hares listened to the word of the redhats. A redhat was safe. A redhat would bring green leaf to the burrow, even when the world was cold and white.

This redhat had been flutter-hearted. She felt it even from where she cowered and shivered in a pile of much snow, hunkered down in the storm. When she was near sleeping she saw the bobbing shape of the redhat. Somehow, he was floating in the air, the snow blowing around him. He was bawling in the nonstop manner redhats did. They were always moving here and there in the wood. Sometimes they traveled with the large hoof-hoofs. Redhats were only worth attention when they had the scent of green leaf about them. So this redhat did not interest her. But then there was a great sound that split the world, a new sound, one Tornear had not heard before. Then the redhat waved his arms and vanished into the white.

It made Tornear herself flutter-hearted, and she dashed. The sound startled her, but the redhat disappearing was...somehow bad. Redhats did not get flutter-hearted. Redhats were fierce. They did not fear the fox or stoat or mink. Whatever would cause a redhat trouble would do double to a hare. She shuddered, pounding her way across the fallen snow. She would not like to see a fox or another of her toothed enemies now for she was tiring and not so near as she liked to the tall hardleaves that appeared as small dark dots well ahead.

Another redhat lived in the great hardleaves away across the snow. She would go to him and thump and circle and click her teeth. Then he would know. Perhaps he would give her tender green leaf too. She ran for a long

time. There was the crunch of the snow beneath her paws, the shiver of the wind and the warm dream of green leaf in a wide and endless field. After a time, she thought of nothing at all.

The storm paused, the snowfall slowed and the path in front of Tornear opened. The black dots had become looming hardleaf, swaying and whipping far above. She swiveled her head this way and that for danger. It made her flutter-hearted all over again to think of loping into that wood. Too many places for creatures who bit and tore to live and hide. A hare on her own might die. Yet something pressed at her. The redhat was in trouble. And when the world was cold-cold, there was only one place to find green leaf. She looked around again and hopped into the forest, her wide eyes searching for the other redhat.

Odveig, steward gnome of Gronn Forest, adjusted the tall, pointed, red hat on top of his head and set his jaw. The frozen gears in front of him should have been Brunfein's work. He was the gear-maker and pump-keeper. Yet Brunfein had broken his leg not nine days before, tending to this very pump. No doubt the gnome was cursing himself this moment and scowling at his useless leg. It would take many more days for the leg to heal. Until then, Odveig had to keep the water flowing. There was always work to be done.

This was the only winter-ready water pump in the forest. It had been silent for six days. Without the pump, there would be no water for wool-dyeing, no water to run the quarter saw, no water for the grist mill. No water meant no clothing, no construction and the use of emergency food stores that would not last the winter. Even now, Junia the Baker, Brunfein's wife, looked at him with eyes that asked why the pump did not run. Without it, flour could only be ground by hand, and there were only so many gnomes to spare to do so. Everyone had a task. The forest's fauna needed tending, hearths needed wood, storerooms needed regular cleaning to ensure other foods did not go rancid. If this went on, the younglings would have to work through to the thaw, grinding rye, sorghum and acorn. The pump had to run.

Odveig squinted as another powerful gust of wind tore through the wood. It was a cruel thing, this winter. Long too. Never had he seen a winter so enduring. The bulbous, pregnant moon had come and gone nine times by his count without a break in the snow and ice.

He hoped idly that the reindeer herds had made it to shelter before the storm hit. It would have been better to keep them in Gronn, but Hundein, steward gnome of Fruuth forest, had insisted that sky moss was more plentiful on the northwestern side of Fruuth. Odveig couldn't argue. Reindeer didn't need much for sustenance in the winter, but this season had gone so long some of the deer had begun to show hard ribs through their thick coats. Hundein said he would lead the reindeer out to the field of sky moss, under the protective cover of a narrow pass.

Odveig pushed at a gear. It did not move. Rubbing his hands up and down on his wool tunic for warmth, he circled the machinery. There was ice on the gear shafts. The midseason thaw and accompanying rainstorm had done it in. The soaked oaken gear works had grown ice in the following cold snap. The ice penetrated the wood. Freeing the works would be no small task.

At the base of the gear works was a platform of ironwood pierced by three wide and sturdy timbers of oak that extended through the platform and deep into the river bed. The entire works was attached to the top of the timbers, the gear shafts extending into the timbers themselves. If he could remove the gear works, he could warm them in front of his hearth. To do that, he would have to break the shafts. Shafts of ironwood that Brunfein had lathed himself to painstaking cylindrical perfection. Odveig doubted whether he could even break the existing shafts. It was said that ironwood of any thickness could not be broken. It did not get brittle in the cold, could not be chopped, sawn or split. No, the timberers, when they bothered, only harvested small amounts of the wood, painstakingly, with very sharp axes. He shook his head. It was a cheery little mess he'd made.

Behind him, the snow crackled. Before he could turn, something pressed into his hand. It was only the scent of hare that kept him from leaping away. Beside him, a wide-eyed white hare clicked its teeth and nosed into him frantically. She would have stood as high as Odveig, but cowering, she looked smaller. A doe. She was panting and edgy, looking about with rolling eyes. Such was the life of a hare. No doubt this one wanted roughage. He kept parsnips in wet sand in his storeroom for the purpose. He supposed word had gotten around this winter.

The hare had only one healthy ear. This stood at attention, swiveling properly behind and to the sides. The other ear drooped, torn quite to bits at the tip with a scar running nearly the length. An old wound. The work of a buck, no doubt. It must have hurt well enough when it was new. He gazed with sympathy at the sorry creature.

On her rear haunches were three distinct spots of downy brown. Odveig frowned. This was a Fruuth hare. The hares of Gronn forest rarely had spots in the winter and then only between their ears or on their front paws. Then he saw that the hare's tail too was brown. This hare had come from farther yet. Perhaps from the other side of Aeidfjord. How it had done so, or why, was beyond him.

The hare worked her hind legs in the snow, trying to thump the ground, but she only slipped on the crust and finally turned on her side, breathing hard. Something had given her a fright. A weasel or some such creature. She had come a long way. Odveig eyed the gears ruefully. Perhaps a moment

away from them would rest his mind. He was out of ideas, and the storeroom was not far.

He motioned for the hare to follow. She rose and hopped after, crossing the river ice to the bank on the other side then staggering in the drifts. In the end, he bade her wait and retrieved the parsnips alone. It was a pleasant surprise to find that the wet sand had not frozen around the wet stores. He'd dug his cellar good and deep. Well, that was some satisfaction this day. A steward gnome's storeroom was no small point of pride. It could keep a whole forest of animals alive in even the bleakest year. He paused in his digging. Perhaps *this* might be called that bleakest of years.

When he returned, the hare was again on her side, exposing a soft belly for any creature to tear into. Had he known she was so dangerously tired, he would not have left her. She sniffed the parsnips once, and then consumed them ravenously. Afterwards she hobbled away to pass stool. She would be well enough now, wherever she had come from.

She punched at the snow again with her hind legs, and pressed at Odveig with her chin. Odveig squinted at her. Hares scented with their chin pad, rubbing it on the ground to mark territory and communicate subtle things to their kin, but he was no kin. Her machinations with her hind legs on the ice were meant to sound a warning. Odveig looked around. There was no danger here. Few predators but an owl would threaten a hare so near a gnome and owls would not fly in such weather or at this time of day. The wolves were bedded down in their den, the weasel and mink riding out the storm in their dug shelters. The hare meant to tell him something. Odveig had never known hares, solitary as they were, to communicate beyond plaintive grouching for food, much less warn a gnome of danger.

She had come from the other side of the fjord. She smelled of fear and was slick with exertion. In fact, she could barely move for all the effort she'd put into getting to Gronn. He looked at her, at the wild eyes and heaving chest. Well, it was worth taking a look at her trail. For all her clicking and nosing, he hadn't a notion of what she wanted. It wasn't that he didn't understand hare, it was that she was so panicked she was saying very little. First, he would have to bed her down in a safe place.

There was an outcropping of mossy, ice-covered limestone on the other side of the river. The hare lay down there, still panting. He piled snow up in front of her so she would be out of sight. She would rest and regain strength

soon enough. She clicked at him as he left, calling him a 'redhat'. He chuckled. It was hare language. For all they could hear and smell, hares' eyesight was poor. Perhaps they saw only the hat. But the hat of a steward gnome meant much to the animals of the wood. It meant aid and protection, healing and survival. He clicked his teeth back at the hare and went on his way. By midday, surely, she would be able to run again.

He left the gears and followed the hare's tracks out toward the edge of the wood. At least it was easy going. She'd chosen a path with shallow snow and had broken ground for him. The cold chewed at him, but there was nothing for it.

It was as he'd expected. The tracks led north and east. Kicking out a path as he went along, he made the edge of the wood and gazed into the plain beyond. The storm had lightened some, the peaks of the Gruthold mountains rising out of the gray aether. He squinted and then all at once, his gut went hollow.

Something about the mountains was out of place. He could not put words to it, but to him it was clear and certain. Trouble. The winds shifted and the Grutholds sank back beyond the wall of swirling snow. Before they did, it came to Odveig. The peaks. They were bare by half.

A snow slide had come down the mountain.

Then the hare had come to him why? There were hares trapped under the snow. He considered it. Perhaps. Never before had he seen an animal cross the fjord. It took him two more steps before something occurred to him. The hare had said redhat. Perhaps she had not meant himself. What then? Another gnome? A chill rode through him, colder than the wind. Another gnome that wore a hat of red. Hundein, the steward gnome of Fruuth. Hundein's herd of reindeer. Had they been in the very path of the slide? How the hare knew or whether it knew mattered little. Hundein had gone to the Grutholds to graze the deer. A snow slide had raged down into the valley. Hundein could well be in trouble.

Odveig ran as fast as he could back to where the hare lay. She did not wake at his approach. When he finally roused her, she lay back and looked at him with a single baleful eye. He had to know what she had seen. Hares thought and spoke in sensations and feelings, not words. The hare clicked at him, saying "redhat" again and "hoof-hoof". Deer.

There was little doubt that Hundein could have been near the site of the slide with the herd. A full herd of reindeer, hundreds strong, would have fared poorly trying to escape a snow slide. A slide was charging death. Yet even if they had not escaped, many could yet be alive. A slide was something neither he nor Hundein had considered. It was lazy thinking. The snowfall this year should have made them both cautious about taking the deer under the shade of the Grutholds.

He would have to find out exactly from where the hare had come. He noted the direction of the hare's tracks and cursed as he saw the snow had nearly erased them in the distance. Tracking her path would not be so easy as he'd thought. It might not matter. The devastation of a snow slide would be hard to miss. If he wasn't wrong, the slide was one for the ages. Even now Hundein could be under the snow, running thin on breath, dying as Odveig stood.

The hare's tracks led toward the coast. The fjord was not far and following the coast would shorten his journey. If only he could find shallow snow.

Yet the gears awaited. In two days, the supply of flour would be lower than it ever had in his lifetime. The gnomes of Gronn could face real hunger. If he left the gears, no one else could fix them. In fact, he may not even be able to fix them. Brunfein could not move nor offer any more help than growls from his bed. If he stayed, he would leave Hundein and the deer to their fate. He looked out into the storm. What to do. The one weighed against the many. Death weighed against hardship and hunger. In the end, it was no choice at all. Hundein stood to die. Odveig would not allow that to happen.

He considered his snow shoes. Those and his thicker tunic. And rope for climbing. And a bit of hot soup and fresh bread and a cup of pinecone wine. He shivered in the wind. There was no time. If Hundein and the herd had been caught by the barrage, they might be lost already. It would take him precious time to get supplied.

He whistled to a cardinal. It peeped back with its insistent, driving call. Odveig found he recognized the bird by the cut of its red crest. It had been just a branchling when he'd last saw it, hopping with youthful lack of caution just this past spring. He was glad to see it had survived the last bitter months. It took wing, flying west, toward Odveig's homestead and his wife, Bethelia. She would know he was on his way toward Aeidfjord. She would know he was away from the gears and would have to find a way to mend them. Blast it all if he didn't consider simply sending a bird to Fruuth. Let Fruuth's gnomes sort it out. But none of them knew deer, the Grutholds, or snow slides. Hundein was the only gnome with any knowledge of the mountains and it was he who'd been caught by them.

There would be a crust and if careful, Odveig could travel on top of it, even without snow shoes. He set off, already thinking that if he could stir up a boar somewhere he'd cut his journey by half. He didn't make it three steps. Before he knew it, he was neck-deep in the powder, cursing and spitting. He again considered going for the snowshoes. No. The image of the hare and its strange panic loomed in his mind.

As if in response, the storm paused, the Grutholds rising once more out from behind the wall of snow. Below the peaks, dark smudges moved in the air. Scavengers. By what he could see of their flight he guessed griffons,

though they could well have been vultures. Odveig's heart beat a bit faster. Something had died down there. Or many things, big things. Like reindeer.

He refused to think of it as he moved through the deep snow toward the fjord. The wind bit with fury now, and he was chilled to his very heart. His homestead was too far, on the western end of the wood. In this weather would take him the rest of the day to reach it, but perhaps the weather was too poor to travel at all without snowshoes. He stood, hunched down in the snow, pulled in two directions, home and away. He found he could no longer feel his feet. They were sensationless lumps at the end of his legs. He wouldn't make it without warmer clothing and proper supplies.

Then he remembered. The southern store! Abandoned when the mennesker had come to widen the path between Gronn and Fruuth forests, Odveig had always looked for an opportunity to empty the storeroom. He was certain it was still there. Hundein had maintained it, so Odveig could not be sure what it contained.

He moved in plodding steps, stumbling in the deeper snows. He understood after a time that he had gone cloudy headed. The snow whipping in front of his eyes made his vision spotty and the breathtaking cold allowed him to think of little else. He stared in the hard cold at the featureless white, a world gone flat. In the endless expanses of snow was spot of black. A corner of worked stone standing above and to his left. The chimney. Odveig shook himself. He'd found it.

The snow beneath the crust of ice was powdery and moved aside with little coaxing. In time, he'd cleared enough to see the outline of the snow-coated structure. He brushed the snow and ice off the wooden latch and doorknob, released the latch and grasped the knob in his bare hand.

It was dark and airless inside and smelled of nothing. He squinted into the darkness until it took shape before him, outlines of boxes and bags of stored grain and dried berries. A pair of Hundein's snow shoes hung on the wall. There was a hole in the webbing of the left shoe. He took them down. The leather ties were drier than he would have liked but flexible enough. They would do. His eyes fell on a small birch crate. It was secured with copper nails. Ah.

After a bit of prying with the blade of his axe, the crate yielded a shawl and a pair of boots embroidered with fine images of daisy and beetlewing. Wytheira. Hundein's wife and Fruuth's best woodcarver. She must have left

the box here many long years ago when she ventured often between Gronn and Fruuth, before the menn's road had all but cut off travel between the two forests. He donned the shawl, its neckpiece only fitting over his head with some struggle. The boots he left and the snowshoes he tucked under an arm and made for the door.

It was not yet midmorning when he crested the ridge near the eastern end of Gronn. The snowshoes worked well enough, though they creaked a bit. No supple leather was this. It was no reassurance to observe the cracks in the tanned deerskin where the leather was tied through the white ash frame. Still, the knots were good, and if he treaded with some care he believed the shoes would hold.

He stopped to bellow in deer speak every here and again. The wind scattered his voice, but perhaps he could rouse something in the pounding helweather. He switched to pig and then yipped in a bit of fox. Finally, a dark shape shook itself from under the snow, rising up and snorting a greeting. The yearling boar was young and ill suited to the weather. It pained Odveig, but he asked the eager pig to take him east, toward Fruuth. It was not far and the yearling could find its way back easily enough. The creature put its snout into the snow and Odveig mounted him about the neck with little trouble, even with his snowshoes. His heart ached a little when he noted the thin hair and warm skin. Well, he would send it back to sleep beneath the snow soon enough. The boar gave an enthusiastic trill and trundled east with unexpected vigor.

Odveig felt a bit of weight fall away for the first time since the hare approached him. He was on his way. The boar was steady and unafraid in the storm, seeming quite proud to do the bidding of a gnome. Some creatures were that way. Odveig was glad he'd found one of them. As they travelled, he called out to the birds. What news? They only rued the weather and tittered of empty stomachs. Odveig assured them the storm would be over soon, though he thought it might go on forever.

When he saw the trees shorten and thin, he leapt down from the boar's back. Fruuth was ahead. He gestured for the boar to go back. The yearling snorted and pawed the snow in a small show of rebellion. Odveig pointed with a stiff arm toward Gronn and the spot where he'd found the yearling. It was likely the pig had never travelled beyond Gronn, and Odveig wouldn't be responsible for it freezing to death in its first winter alone. With a last mournful trill, the boar watched him leave. When Odveig turned back, he could see nothing but the snowflakes whipping and tumbling in the bitter air.

In a few steps, Odveig was overlooking the menn's path, and beyond, Fruuth forest, Hundein's wood. It would be easier to cross the road here where the meeting of the two forests gave cover. The land opened up

northward, turning into fields where the path curved north and eventually ran west along the fjord. If he crossed there he would be in the open and too vulnerable to eager raptors or even the menn themselves. As expected in the vast snowfall, the path was clear of the sloppy marks of menn and the beasts they drove. Odveig couldn't understand the keeping of creatures in that fashion. Why close them in and hand feed them each day when they were capable of finding their own sustenance in the field and wood?

Something made his breath catch. He had allowed himself to wander. Only now did he register the stink of burnt tobacco in the air. There was just one creature who set fire to goodleaf. Shuffling in practiced silence to hide alongside a black and leafless buckthorn, he peered down the path. There were two of them. Fear moved through him, bringing sweat to his brow. He frowned. There was no need to be frightened. He had seen menn before. At a distance. In the southern fields. Once. Long ago.

Now these menn edged closer, their gate wide and menacing, their dark clothing wrapped close to their bodies. They wore shapeless dark hats, flat and ugly. He could hear them murmuring to each other. Two males by the sound of their voices, putting brown sticks of burning goodleaf to their mouths and burping out great billows of smoke, as if their very throats were flues! Goodleaf was for chewing. To burn it was like setting fire to a loaf of bread. What purpose could it serve?

The menn made noises, but not proper words to Odveig's ears. Menn's language was not so unlike gnomish. At least, so said the stories. He understood just one word. *Fjyll*. Mountain. They stopped along the path, just paces from Odveig. He held his breath. The two faced away from him, gazing toward the Grutholds. There was nothing to see in the storm.

Odveig expected they would move on. He waited, breathing in conscious silence, afraid to make a sound. In the stories, menn were like owls and wolves and lynx. They thought gnomes a lip-smacking treat, or worse, an interesting plaything. If they simply turned about they would see him, exposed and alone beside the buckthorn.

As they were closer now, he could hear more of their odd speech. It was lazy and slow but familiar all the same. *Sny*, they said. Snow. And Odveig heard them mention mountains again. One of them pointed toward the Grutholds. He made a sweeping motion.

Perhaps they knew about the slide. Odveig did not know why it would be a concern of menn. They seemed to care little about the world outside of their great wooden shelters, which they built everywhere they could. Menn only wanted to tear the earth and plant and harvest and kill their animals and feast and shout. Or so the stories said.

Unconsciously, Odveig stomped his snowshoes, trying to stay warm. The shoes crunched upon the crust of ice. The menn turned. Odveig's eyes widened. He tried to sidle around the other side of the tree but the shoes became stuck in the pieces of broken snow crust and the powder above and below. He flailed and fell and the snow came up all around him.

At once, everything was still. Odveig could see nothing but white, and felt only the press of snow. He'd fallen below the crust. In dull, distant tones, the menn spoke. There was crunching nearby and the heavy impact of footfalls. They were coming. He struggled to right himself, but his snowshoes were held fast in the snow. He could only dig toward his feet with his arms. Frantic, he managed to carve out space enough below his chest to start cleaning the snow under his knees. His shoulders already ached from the exertion.

He paused, listening. They were over him. One spoke to the other, his voice raising in a question. The other seemed to respond, his tones dropping in explanation. Any moment they would reach down and crush his body with their horrid hands. He lay still, wishing for a distraction. A gust of wind. A flock of cormorants, a stampede of weasel. He did not breathe. A large boot prodded the fluff around him and receded. There was a grunt and the voices went silent.

Odveig waited a long beat then dug furiously. In time, and with some cursing—warming himself indeed!—he came again to the surface. He listened well before fully rising. He had been under several arm lengths of snow. Unseen. Their exploration with the boot must have been simple curiosity, not discovery. He saw the menn well up the path now, gazing once and again toward the Grutholds. His heartbeat did not slow for a long time.

The encounter had warmed him. The menn were distant blemishes on the horizon. It was time to cross. He found a frond of cedar and bolted into Fruuth forest, sweeping away the marks of his snowshoes as he went.

Fruuth was quiet but for the whistle of the wind and the creak of the trees. It was always strange to him that Fruuth did not feel the same as Gronn, though the two woods were separated by a path little wider than the girth of a 100-year oak. The menn's path had divided Gronn and Fruuth not a century before. Once they had been one forest. No more.

Cedar and fir grew tall and robust just inside the edge of the forest. Ahead, long white trunks of a thick grove of birch rattled like reeds, louder even than the brutish wind. He looked around, shielding his eyes from the pelting snow. There was only one thing to do. Go on.

He took some solace that his boots had kept out the snow and the shawl the wind off his back. Without them, he would be far colder and unable to travel. The snowshoes creaked and the trees shook as he broke trail toward

the fjord. He wondered what the sea would look like in a storm like this. He would cross the northwestern corner of Fruuth, heading northeast toward Aeidfjord. There was a pass that climbed eastward. At its far end he could overlook the fjord itself and get a closer look at the Grutholds before turning north to traverse their base, where the slide had come down.

As the forest grew thick, he had to wind in turns toward his destination as thick blackberry and nickingstem stood across much of the wood. He rued the weather. In the windiest areas he could barely move and in the windless areas the powder had built up over the crust so travel, even with his shoes, was slogging. Add the brambles to that and it was terribly slow going.

The land rose, climbing the modest hills toward the cliffs of Aeidfjord. The cold had set in so deeply that he felt the stiffness that could turn into dead fingers and toes. He would know when he was close to that. It would be some time yet.

In mid-stride a leather binding of his left snowshoe snapped. Odveig's deerskin boot plunged through into the powder. He sat at once, sweeping aside snow, eager to repair it. He pried the knots securing the shoes to his boots, but his frozen fingers could only claw at the fastenings. Plus, his boot was well trapped in the severed leather. Blast it, there was no time. Taking an extra moment to aim with his axe, he chopped at the broken shoe, cutting it away from his boot. It took two blows. He considered the other intact shoe then cut it away, too. A waste of good shoes. He rent the remainder of each shoe into pieces. Otherwise, spring would reveal two tiny snowshoes to any mennesker coming through the wood. It wouldn't do.

He scattered the pieces in every direction and stood squinting, for the moment defeated. Aeidfjord was ahead, Fruuth behind and the storm all around. He was cold, dangerously so, without proper equipment, and far from home. He stepped into the shelter of a wide cottonwood. Even these short steps left him waist high in the snow. He had to think. The cottonwood bark perhaps. He could cut away a two pieces and tie them to his boots with fibers torn from the shawl. They would not last long but perhaps—

"Got the pump working yet?" a voice asked. He looked up. Deeper into the woods, a vague shape moved. Odveig pushed off the birch's trunk, a hand to his brow to ward off the wind. As it came closer, the shape became a gnome, and he found an unstoppable smile coming to his lips. Ahead, his cousin Nelmia, timberer of Fruuth forest, leaned against an outcropping of

limestone wrapped in a scarf of white sheep's wool. She stood easily, as though the wind and storm affected her not at all. To Odveig, a roasting hearth could not have been a more welcome sight.

Nelmia's axe shone dully at her side and the tiny chips of birch stuck to her breeches. She was not one to cease work in the cold time of the year. Few timberers would cut and split in late winter at all, preferring to carve utensils or mend tools until the spring. Nelmia felled and stacked wood almost every day of the year.

"I see you're wearing more elaborate garments in your mid-age," she grinned, gesturing to the shawl. Odveig frowned. "Well, you'd better come in."

He didn't argue.

In the warmth of Nelmia's tidy homestead beneath a sturdy oak at the edge of Fruuth, it was stifling to wear an extra layer, so Odveig shed the shawl and allowed himself to rub his hands together near the fire. It would not do to stay long. He was already behind. He relayed his task quickly.

"A snow slide?" Nelmia's eyes darted. "Hundein was leading his herd through the pass."

"I know. That is, now I know for certain." He stood. "I need snowshoes."

"I have some." She went into a cupboard and handed him a pair of sturdy ones with fresh leather. Odveig felt relief just holding them. He could make the Grutholds. "And this." She held out a woolen tunic, gray as oak bark. "And these," Nelmia said, holding up four polished pine skis and four poles. Odveig grimaced. He preferred the shoes. Yet he could not deny that now he was in Fruuth the Grutholds' valley downhill was downhill. The skis could cut his journey by half.

"I will come with you," Nelmia said, without looking up.

"It would be better —"

"— Better if what? You went alone?"

"I was going to say if you found a sledge."

"No, I'll send my petrels out to spread the message."

"Petrels?" Odveig frowned. He didn't like sea birds. They were undependable at best.

Nelmia pursed her lips. "Cousin, you've been in Gronn too long."

"Perhaps."

The skis were well polished with drained honeycomb, and they cut through the snow with such ease that Odveig felt something near glee. He'd forgotten the advantages of speed. Snowshoes were a steward gnome's standby, made for deep snow, allowing a gnome to listen, if desired, after each step. It was important to listen to the wood. It would not do to fly through the forest, the wind whistling and the trees a blur. Yet today he was not a steward. Today he attended to something else. His heart beat faster thinking of Hundein taking shallow breaths under the weight of the slide. Or not taking breaths at all.

Nelmia's offered snowshoes tied to Odveig's back, they skied the sloping terrain across Fruuth's northwestern corner then the gnome paths eastward. Finally, they removed the skis and climbed. Nelmia paused to whistle the peculiar purring song of petrels. Soon enough, one of them dropped down out

of the gray, the white flash of its underwings the only interruption of its perfect concealment against the sky. The bird flitted overhead in a tight circle. Nelmia whistled again, and it took wing upward, murmuring the message to the invisible others in the flock above.

They went on. It seemed moments before Aeidfjord was before them. It had been long since Odveig looked upon the stark stone and surging waters. Sheer gray rock extended from where he stood all the way down the rough basalt cliffs, many oak lengths, to the sea. Below, in the dark waters, yet darker shapes fluttered and preened, unbothered by the cold. Sea eagles. He had hoped as much but now that they were before him, he hesitated.

He sighed and considered that he would never make it on his own. That the hare had come so far was remarkable, but gnomes were not made for running or for long travel on foot. It would take him until nightfall at least to circumscribe the fjord. Reluctantly, he removed his hat and waved it in the air.

“What are you doing?” Nelmia hissed.

“Calling the birds,” he said.

She eyed him queerly. It was odd to signal a bird visually, but the distance was great and the wind strong. After the third time, Odveig thought the eagles might just be ignoring him. They bobbed in the black waves. Stark white feathers against black ones. Beaks as yellow as spring poppies facing the sun. He whistled three sharp notes. They turned. One opened and closed its mouth. Yet the birds remained in the water, riding the stormy sea. Odveig shrugged his skis off of his shoulder and placed them on the stony ground.

It was difficult to call to a raptor of any type, but eagles heeded few. Below, the rocks were numerous and sharp. Enough to slice a gnome in two. Blasted birds. He hefted a small stone in his hand, gave the eagles a glance and threw. The stone arced into the haze, still and silent. It splashed down in front of the flock. They clacked at him, irritated. Pitch and ash, what to do. He thought of climbing down.

Nelmia stood frowning. He sighed. There was another way to call a raptor. It was not a wise one. It was not one that he'd tried but one he'd been shown. Long ago, in a place he would not willingly venture again. There was little choice. The road would be long and futile on foot. He gave Nelmia an apologetic glance.

Putting a hand to his hat, Odveig stepped out into open air.

He considered that he might have given the eagles one last wave. There had been no gasp from Nelmia as he leapt out toward the water, but he thought her expression might have been something else. He fell rapidly, the wind snapping at his clothing. He tried to keep his feet pointed toward the water and his eyes locked on the group of eagles. It was hard to tell, but it seemed none of them had taken flight. Certainly the eagles saw him dropping. They'd been looking right at him. Any moment. Surely. The air forced itself into his eyes and nose and in a moment his eyes teared up and he lost sight of the eagles. As the world became a single blurred mass of light and dark, he thought of his wife, Bethelia. There was the wrenching of the wind against his body, the weightless bliss of free fall and the singular realization that these might well be his last moments.

Then there was softness and speed. A dizzying, swooping sensation. Odveig grasped with everything he had onto the eagle's neck feathers. It squawked. He collapsed in relief. Blasted sea eagles. The bird glided north over the fjord and flock until he tugged and the bird turned back toward the cliff where Nelmia stood. Odveig called to the other eagles, finally rousing one more out of the waters to follow. The male rose with sluggishness wingbeats into the stormy sky.

At the cliffs, the two raptors extended their clawed toes and latched onto the outcropping of rock immediately in front of Nelmia. She gave him a skeptical look.

She shook her head. "Petrels are one thing, cousin —"

The bird clacked again. It eyed Nelmia for a moment and then snapped at her. For a moment, it seemed the hooked beak would reach its target. Then Nelmia reached out and swatted its beak aside with such force that the sea eagle fell backward over the cliff. After a moment, they saw it gliding away, low over the water.

Nelmia looked after it with disdain in her eyes. "As I said, petrels are one thing. I shall find my own way."

Odveig gave her a slow nod then urged the eagle into the air. He did not doubt she would. It was a terrible feeling to be lifted into the sky. He spoke to it as firmly as he could manage. It rewarded him with a bowel-clenching mid-air wend. He gripped with bloodless hands until the bird leveled off. If he laid his head down and nestled beneath the feathers, he would not witness the

horrifying distance between himself and the ground or the way landscape raced below. In the feathers he felt almost warm.

He let the bird fly. It would take him where he'd bade it. He might have dozed on a deer or boar for such a distance, but with the height, the exhaustion, the rumblings of his belly and his fear for Hundein, he could not. In time the porous black expanse of the Grutholds rose up before them, tall and fearsome. Below, the valley looked a featureless field of white. No, not featureless. The snow was rough, piled up, not the smooth rolling drifts of fallen snow. Yes, a snow slide had come down the mountain.

It had left desolation. A wide expanse of tumbled snow. The force must have been tremendous. Like a stampede of ten thousand reindeer crashing over the valley. What was beneath the drifts?

They landed on the very base of the slide. The snow was packed well enough on top to walk with snow shoes. From here he thought he might see something sticking up out of the snow. Hints of what lay beneath. He saw nothing. Beside him, the eagle nestled its head into its neck feathers. Odveig had little desire to fly again. "Find the gnome under the snow."

The eagle seemed to think about it. Finally, it took to the air, its great wings sending up billows of loose snow. Overall, Odveig thought he took it with proper gnomish patience, squinting as the snow kicked up by the eagle's wingbeats tried to slice into his eyes and piled up around him. He waited until the bird was well into the sky. He extracted himself from the accumulated drift and allowed himself to curse the hook-beaked buzzard.

The bird soared back and forth over the slide's wreckage. If Hundein had been lucky or clever enough, perhaps he had ridden it out. The eagle screamed once and dove, flying low over a patch of the northeastern corner of the slide. He watched her wingtip touch a bit of exposed basalt, the porous black mineral that made up this part of the Grutholds. Odveig ran toward the spot. He could see no difference between that and any part of the slide, but the eagle had sighted something. He stepped carefully, alert and hopeful.

It was not basalt. No, it was a single reindeer hoof, sticking up out of the snow. Odveig put his hand to the short brown fur. Cold. This one had passed. How it must have struggled. He looked up. There. An antler, still as an oak on a windless day. He grasped it. The animal did not stir. Two gone. He put a hand to his brow and swept his gaze across the snows. A tuft of deer hair. Another hoof. The herd had been devastated. Hundein could be anywhere.

The slide had piled up and over the foothills. It was impossible to tell the depth. Hundein could be under it all, buried alive, smashed against the rocks in the valley's basin, pulled apart by the strength of the slide.

He allowed his gaze to grow wide to encompass the snows around him, the mountains, the eagle in flight, the flakes whipping in the air, the gray solidity of the Grutholds. If he were leading a herd and the crack of a slide had sounded down the mountain, what would he do? Where would he go? It had been a long time since he had last been in this valley, yet he remembered that around the northeastern part of the pass was an outcropping, slabs of basalt stacked up from a fall many centuries before. They formed a cave, of sorts. It had been just...there.

He could not tell how deep the snow was or if he'd chosen the right spot. The snow was loose enough. He began digging with his bare hands. In moment his hands froze and his shoulders began to ache. The day had gone on too far too long. There was a length of fir nearby, wrenched no doubt from a tree torn from the mountain. It was as thick as clenched fist. He chopped away the branches and shaped it until it resembled a narrow shovel. Then he set in earnest to digging.

The snow opened up before him, revealing only more of itself. He heaved it behind him, stomping down a track as he went. The light was failing. The morning, the gears, the river and the hare all seemed far away. The day had slipped into afternoon and now the dusk threatened, changing the mottled surfaces around him from white to blue as he dug without thought, without cease, without hope, as steadily and deeply as he could.

After a time, he became so sore and tired he began to sway, his length of fir hitting the empty air as much as the snow. He could hardly see for the inexorable setting sun. One errant swing sent the stick into the undug part of the tunnel just in front of him. It plunged in and at once a horned head came through. Odveig fell back. A reindeer! It gazed at him and bolted through the opening into the tunnel. It trampled the ground around him and fled onto the surface of the snow slide.

Odveig cursed, and there was another. A reindeer would no more step on a gnome than turn down a bushel of sky moss, but these were desperate creatures. He was only able to press himself against the side of the passage as more than a dozen deer made their stumbling way through the loose snow

pack into the valley. Leaf and feather, he'd been right. Their passage opened up a short tunnel.

Inside, Odveig found Hundein slumped against the rocks. There was blood, and the gnome's leg was twisted terribly. Odveig understood Hundein had saved the deer, put them into this overhanging rock, as many as he could, gotten caught somehow, broken his leg and crawled here. The gnome was long gone. His blue tunic was stained with a crimson ichor, frozen at the edges. His head had fallen loosely onto his chest, snowshoes tucked under his body, his nose in his beard.

For a moment, Odveig feared to approach. Then he reached down to extract his friend from the frosted cave.

"What? You don't have even a greeting for an old gnome?" Hundein growled. Odveig gasped. Hundein attempted a smile that became a grimace. "I'm not dead yet. I can't move, blast you. Help me up."

It was manageable enough to set the leg with the length of fir split in half and tied on either side with the leather from Hundein's snow shoes. It was not a straight fracture, but the splint would help some until they could get him home. The gnome been thrown against the rocks with the herd and a rough bit of stone had scraped his belly well enough. Yet there was no puncture, just a wide angry swath of grisled flesh from neck to waist that bled freely once they peeled the tunic away. That had been Hundein's idea. To remove the tunic. Odveig had bade him leave it. Emeiria, Fruuth's healer, could fix him up well enough when they returned. With a last rally of strength, Odveig dragged him out of tunnel and onto the slide.

"How did you know?" Hundein asked, wincing as he was set down.

Odveig's looked across the fjord toward Gronn. "A hare."

Hundein's let out a whoop that turned to a groan. "She made it. I saw her in the instant it all came down. I bellowed at her and she ran. She saved my life then."

"And her own, it seems," said Odveig sweeping his gaze over the valley.

"She made it all the way to you... Tinder and flame, I cannot believe it."

"Now the deer." Odveig said.

"When they heard the slide, most of them bolted north," Hundein coughed. "I took the back of the herd under the crag."

He bellowed in deer speak up the valley. Above them, a patch of piled snow crumbled and rolled down. For a moment, the two gnomes looked at each other, still as fallen leaves.

“Best not try that again,” Odveig murmured. Hundein grunted his agreement.

Yet look, Odveig,” He pointed. The dark shapes of deer gathered at the north end of the slide. “That half escaped. They were nearly out of the valley when it struck. The rest I tried to get under cover.”

He gazed around, counting. In time, he paused and took a deep shuddering breath. “Eighteen. I lost eighteen. Three strong does among them.” He held his side, frowning.

“Take it gentle now,” said Odveig “The body does not heal in a moment.”

As they watched, the herd began to make its way south across the slide, toward Fruuth. Hundein cleared his throat and gestured north. “There is something more. We were not the only ones threatened by the slide.”

Now that Odveig took a good look, the unmistakable peak of a mennesker’s house rose up out of the snow. Blast it. It had not been here the many years ago when Odveig had traveled this part of the land.

“They’re inside,” Hundein said. “The menn. Some are in there. Animals, too. I could hear them. Well, I think I could. Somehow, hurt and under the snow as I was, I believe I could hear them. They and the deer...” he stopped speaking and cleared his throat. Astonished, Odveig turned his head respectfully.

“I should have known, Odveig. I lead the deer here. Their deaths are—”

Odveig did not hesitate. There were times when a gnome made a mistake and had to account for it. Not this time. “No. I have not seen a slide in the Grutholds in my lifetime. Neither my father. It is this blasted long winter. We both might have thought of it, but it is no fault of yours or any other gnome that the snow came down.”

Hundein said nothing for a time. Finally, he cleared his throat. “Anyway, what are you standing here for? Get them out.”

Odveig stepped away to look at the peaks of the homesteads. So much snow. His body was spent. He did not know how he had brought Hundein out of the cave. Now he would have to rescue mennesker. He might have been frightened but for the fact that he had no real way to help them. There

were no tools, no creatures about to call, no method he could think of to move that much snow.

Then Hundein called to him. Odveig looked up to see blue and green shapes emerging from Fruuth forest, on the eastern side of the valley, and riding atop larger, rounder shapes. The gnomes of Gronn and Fruuth. They'd come. On boars.

Now there was no reason to leave the menn to their fate. Not that he would have. Not this day. He watched the line of gnomes approach, too exhausted to meet them.

Nelmia arrived at the head of the group atop a hefty, long-tusked sow that looked at Odveig with alert and searching eyes. She leapt down, a coil of rope slung over her chest and two wide shovels in her hands.

She nodded to Odveig. "You found him. And he looks better than usual," she said slapping Hundein on the back. He moaned. "Well, why are we waiting? Let's get the deer and head home."

Odveig and Hundein eyed her. "What?" she asked.

Odveig was surprised to see the other gnomes accept their task without fear or complaint. Forest gnomes were no more friends to menn than was lightening to a dry forest. Yet it would be a particular cruelty to allow a creature of any kind die under the snow.

"There are three menn's homesteads here," Odveig shouted to the eight gnomes gathered before him. "Plus a homestead of sorts for their animals, you know the kind. Painted red. No hearth. A milking cow or two, I'd say. Fowl or a horse or both, perhaps. The structure has likely collapsed, so the animals may be hurt. Now for the menn. If they have any sense, which is unclear, they are simply trapped inside their own homesteads."

They set to work as the snow turned from blue to pink in the light. There were indeed three homesteads and a...barn. Nelmia had said the new word to him as she dug a guide hole into the surface. After she'd made it wide enough, she motioned to the sow, who stood nearby. With little sound, the pig tore into the opening, her hooves churning, her snout gouging. She burrowed to the red painted wall of the barn. Inside, the cows gazed at them with rolling eyes and twitching tails. Finally, perhaps understanding the danger within the barn was worse than the strangers without, they rose and trotted off to mill not far from the rescued reindeer who stood glassy eyed or dug for sky moss.

Only one of flues, sticking out of the top of the homestead, smoked from a fire inside. Nelmia instructed a couple of younger gnomes to drop down the two cold flues first. One homestead was empty, a blessing. The other was crushed, smashed in by the weight of the snow. After looking it over, Smidlein, a young gnome and a builder, climbed out of the flue covered in soot.

She spat and shook her head. "Beams so dry it is a wonder they didn't crack in the wind. The whole place is collapsed. Two of them dead inside. An female and male, gray of hair. A pity. Avoidable. The center beam ran just over the stove, so it dried fast and pulled away from the wall."

The deer moved past the gnomes as they worked. The creature's eyes were dull and unfocused. More than half of the herd had reached the Fruuth side now after staggering across the snow, their legs often plunging through the soft upper layer of the slide. At the trailing edge of this line lingered some of the oldest deer and the yearlings, watched over by an aged doe of perhaps a half dozen seasons, her sure steps showing the less experienced ones a path across the valley. As Odveig watched, her ears rose and she turned toward the mountain, her flanks tensing.

His breath caught. The twitch of a reindeer's ear. It was something he'd learned never to ignore. He listened hard, scanning the twisting clouds that obscured the peaks above. All at once, the whole herd raised their slender necks and gazed about with wide eyes. A large buck, his coat bloodied along his haunches, bolted in the direction of Fruuth. Several of the nearby deer followed.

The mountain rumbled.

"No." Odveig said. A whisper sounded across the valley. The movement of rushing snow. Scattered up and down the slide, the gnomes of Fruuth paused in their work. He met Hundein's eye. The gnome's eyes darkened with fear.

Odveig cupped his hands to his mouth. "It's COMING DOWN!" he bellowed. At once and as one, the gnomes moved toward Fruuth, sprinting away or mounting boars. The crest of the avalanche roared out from beneath the clouds. A great white maw. It would bury them all.

He grabbed Hundein by the tunic, ignoring the gnome's shouted curses, and threw him atop a small boar. The gnome cursed and spat, grasping at his splinted leg, but he hung on and was borne away. At the southern edge of the slide, the gnomes and animals ran. He looked to the north. No one. They had

all cleared the uppermost part of the slide. Now it was down to speed. The deer seemed to have little trouble clearing the slide, but the boars and gnomes lagged.

Odveig was about to turn and follow when he saw again the flues of the mennesker houses. The lass. The menn. They would be buried.

The slide reared above him, towering and fierce. It was close, faster than he'd thought possible. He was too far away from the other gnomes who might yet clear the path of the coming slide. He had waited too long. He could go neither up nor down nor away. Odveig raced north toward the mennesker homestead. If he could get deep enough down the tunnel, he could keep from being crushed. He leapt feet first into the tunnel in the very moment before the snow slide burst over the him, covering the valley.

There was a white, breathless lack of noise. Then the groaning of the slide settling and ceasing. All around him was snow. Above. Below. Everywhere. The weight of it pressed on him until he could not move. Until he could not even gasp. Until his fate was singular and immediate. The last bit of air was pressed out by the increasing pressure and he grew heady in the dimming light. It was comforting somehow. The embrace.

His arm. He could move his arm. Yes. He swept a space out before him, his mouth opening and closing, searching, but there was no air, no breath to take. He was too deep, and the airlessness tore at his lungs until he could think of nothing else. For a moment, there was a floating sensation, and the world slowly faded into a gray haze.

There were shadows, blue images, fuzzy at the edges. The spotty eruptions of a mind starved of air. He could recognize that even now as he slowly died under the crush. The images came faster now, in pinks and violets, a sunset of color. A round, pink dusk. He blinked. His eyes rolled, unfocused. A wet, huffing pinkness. A snout.

Odveig drew in a humid breath, his eyes focusing. A boar's snout. He breathed again. The odor was terrible. Something wet pressed into his cheek. A hoof plunged into the powder, widening a great hole that rose half an oak length to the surface and the gray sky above. He drank in a sweet, clean breath free of boar's breath.

It was the yearling! The boar trilled happily and dug at the snow with its persistent hoofs. The stubborn creature must have followed his path all the way around the fjord. Followed the path of the Fruuth gnomes and boars as well, no doubt. The boar's efforts sent snow into the tunnel, nearly covering Odveig again.

"Enough!" he gasped. The digging stopped. He signaled to the yearling to put its snout into the hole. Odveig grabbed the whiskers. The boar squealed and scabbled backward. Odveig's snowshoes were pulled off, lost to the snows, and he was lifted to the surface.

He looked about. There was no one but the yearling. No gnomes. Nothing but the cracking of bowed trees above him, smashed by the slide, and an eerie stillness. The young boar sniffed the air. Odveig gazed at its thin coat and pink skin. It had saved his life. The yearling held its snout to the air and trilled once more. Trillet. That could be its name.

Odveig went to rise but fell back. His body wouldn't obey. The day had been too long. Too long by far. He rolled over and looked up at the peaks. From what he could see under the clouds and the powder kicked up by the slide, the entire mountain was exposed, almost free of snow. The first slide had taken the peak and the piled snow must have put pressure on the snowfall lower on the mountain, creating the second slide. He tried to get up again but collapsed onto his back. He just needed a moment. Then he could do it.

Trillet snorted and began digging. The boar soon disappeared into the hole. He was digging westward and down at a shallow angle. Perhaps he smelled tubers. No doubt the journey had made him hungry. From the south, a sound came to Odveig's ears. He sat up. He crawled toward it. It seemed every bit of his body objected. He faltered and stopped many times, but in time he could see the edge of the slide. Ahead the noise became voices. He rose to his knees, heaving. The last distance he covered on all fours, like a youngling. The voices became clear.

"Dig blast you," Nelmia said. "They're in there somewhere, and not deep."

As if in response, a bare gnome's head burst out of the snow just in front of Odveig. Baldeim, a timberer of Fruuth. The gnome sputtered and worked his arms in the snow, climbing his way to the surface. Odveig could only sit and watch.

"Here," Baldeim nodded to Nelmia, indicating the snows below him. "They are just here."

Nelmia had brought nine gnomes in all from Fruuth. Four of them dug next to her, their shovels working the edge of the slide carefully and steadily. Nelmia dug with her bare hands. She made five, and that left another four under the slide. Plus six boars. Hundein had made it clear. He lay on the back of the boar, his eyes closed, his chest rising and falling with long breaths. The deer had escaped. In a haze, Odveig could see the herd moving away into the scrub brush at the northern edge of Fruuth. They would be glad to be away from the valley. Soon, the four were free, red-faced and subdued, rubbing at their cold limbs. The pigs broke through on their own once enough of the snow had been removed.

As the last sow snorted and shook herself free of snow, Nelmia looked up. "Odveig!" He was still sitting, dazed, above them. She rushed to him. Without meaning to, Odveig collapsed into her arms.

“Cousin,” he said after a moment. “We must let this be our last snow slide.”

Nelmia chuckled and handed him her drinking flask. He waved it off. “I have had enough of water, melted or frozen, for today.”

“Drink up, cousin. What’s inside is far better than water.”

The pinecone wine hit his stomach like a burning coal. It festered for a moment then spread its warmth outward. Odveig drank again. The others gathered around him. Smidlein helped him to his feet. They all stood for a time, looking out at the valley. Then it was time to finish the work.

The third mennesker homestead, the one with the smoking flue, was no longer visible. Yet it was uncovered in time by the entire team of gnome and pig. They worked silently. It would not do to have the menn inside see them. When a hole had been dug to the door wide enough for the menn to escape, Nelmia signaled Odveig. They looked together down the tunnel to the homestead.

“Now what?” he asked.

“Leave them. They’ll understand soon enough that they are free.”

Odveig frowned. “Why wait?” he hiccuped. He took a last drink out of her canteen and handed it to her.

Nelmia shrugged and buckled the canteen to her belt. “I’ll leave you to it then. I’ve no desire to bother with menn, not today.

“You’ll bring Hundein to Emeiria in Gronn?” Odveig asked.

“Of course. I’m sure you have an idea how you’ll get back?”

“Yes,” he said, gazing up at Trillet who had lain down at his side. The pig snuffled.

Nelmia looked amused. “Small losses, Odveig. Only small losses today.” She gave him a grin and glanced up the slopes of the Grutholds as she took the tail position in the group. Odveig waved as they departed. Smidlein put her hands to her hips and bawled at the remaining deer. They sniffed the air and trundled southerly as one.

Odveig chewed his lip as she rode away. He ensured the other gnomes had vanished into edge of Fruuth before he approached the homestead. His bodily aches felt far away now. His belly remained warm with wine and he was beset with a rare enthusiasm. Snow covered a window next to the door. He wiped the glass free of frost and peered inside. There were three of them. A female, a male and a youngling, a lass. They were alive, sitting about the fire.

The gnomes of Gronn and Fruuth had done their work quickly and quietly. It was time to tell the menn they were free.

He knocked once on the glass. Whether it was the crackling of the hearth or the wind outside, only the lass heard. She looked up, her rosy cheeks rising as her face broke out in a wide smile. Odveig looked on in fascination. The lass seemed harmless enough. She pointed to the window, and as the adult mennesker turned, Odveig leapt from the ledge and retreated. Trillet bore him away, still eager, snorting with each breath as they race along the edge of the slide toward Fruuth. Once they reached the forest, he bade Trillet to slow. They made their way with ease toward the thicker wood. Atop the yearling's broad back, Odveig could relax. So could Trillet. The boar began digging. Odveig was too tired to bade him stop. The pig made a shallow depression and without warning lay down in it. Odveig was thrown off. When he picked himself up with no small effort, Trillet was asleep. Odveig opened his mouth to scold him but no words would come. It was hard to find blame with the young, brave boar.

Something clacked. To the west of him, atop a black outcropping of basalt, the sea eagle blinked its glassy eye. Odveig gazed at it with narrowed eyes. He supposed there was more than one way back to Gronn. Yes. He patted the snoring pig. Certainly it knew its way around the wood now. Its journey had proved that well enough. It would find its way back.

Odveig turned and hailed the eagle, but it flew towards a nearby stand of trees with thick, red trunks. He cursed it well and good as it flapped away. It landed among the tangled branches.

"Hah!" he said. Well, it was fitting. Ironwood.

Atop the eagle, five straight and even armlengths of ironwood tied in a bundle and strapped to his back, the air seemed somehow warmer. As if the cold had finally spent itself, having washed up against the hard cliffs and peaks of Aeidfjord and the impassive Gruthold mountains. Odveig even sat up for part of the ride and allowed the air to course through his beard, a feeling of pleasure so satisfying he laughed out loud. If only Bethelia could have heard him! Her spouse, laughing! As the trees of Gronn appeared like silent guardians out of the gray, he spoked to the eagle. Resting easily against the eagle's sinewy neck, he held on firmly until it landed.

He went home and slept long and hard. In the morning, he was eager to get back to the gears, swallowing his breakfast without chewing. Bethelia gave him a wry look.

"What is it?" he asked, breaking open a boiled quail's egg.

"You're thinking of the pump, of course."

"Of course."

"I had an idea about it."

Odveig frowned. "Sure, well, in order to break the ice—"

"—with squirrels."

"What?"

"I think we've done it with the help of a few of the red squirrels. They gnawed on the wood some, but they listened well enough. If I'm not wrong, they'll be back to finish the job this morning."

Odveig examined the featureless surface of the shelled egg. "You've fixed the pump?"

Bethelia shrugged. "Loosed the gears. The pump still does not run."

Odveig thought about it. He found himself put off that his wife had fixed a problem that he himself should have solved. Pride. "My wife, you amaze me."

"You think a carver doesn't know a trick or two about wood in the winter season?" She smiled, slicing off a piece of acorn bread.

When he arrived at the frozen pump Odveig watched three red squirrels scurrying about the gears, licking and gnawing at the ice, grunting at them occasionally when one attempted to bite into the wood itself. It was clever. Very clever indeed. Perhaps he was too reluctant to call the forest's animals into service unless the need was great. But then a gnome became soft when work was done for him.

The hare was still in the area, hopping about on sore legs. Fool creature. If not for the storm, she would have died nine times by now. She vied for his attention, but he had no time for her now. She would find her own food. He wondered whether she would make her way back to Fruuth or remain here. Gronn was an excellent place for hare. Perhaps she would breed with the local population and soon they would have kits running about with brown spots on their rumps.

He brought out his axe and examined the blade. Sharp enough. He worked the ironwood he'd brought from Aeidfjord. By midday, twelve new ironwood axels lay at his feet, stripped and cut to perfection. Proof he could do with an axe what Brunfein could do with a lathe. He tapped the axels into place. It was time.

He turned the gears which moved with reluctance. He cranked them until they felt free in his hands. Then he dropped the main gear down into the works, connecting the top of the pump to the paddle wheel below. Nothing happened. He swore. He kicked at the snow. Then he saw the ratchet still holding the lower gears in place. He released it. The gears began moving. The river flowed, the paddlewheel turned and for a moment he imagined the gnomes of Gronn letting out a great cry of joy. He heard nothing.

As he watched the gears turn, Nelmia walked up out of the eastern woods. She looked bemusedly at the hare who crouched at the river bank, watching Odveig. Then she patted it on the head. "I'll bring this one back with me. It'll be good company in the night."

"Good. You don't worry about owls?"

"Owls? I have other company," she said, gesturing behind her. Odveig could hear just faintly the grunting of boar. He nodded.

"Hundein is lying well and comfortable in a bed at Emeiria's hearth, a plug of good leaf in his mouth and a belly full of pinecone wine staying the pain. She insisted he stay."

Odveig raised his eyebrows. "How did she manage that?"

Nelmia shrugged. "She threatened to break his other leg."

Odveig let a thin smile come to his face. Nelmia clapped him on the shoulder and turned away, the hare loping along after. He listened to her footfalls crunching into the snow and fading away.

Finally Odveig stood alone. There was the faint snorting of the boars shuffling off, the scrabbling of the squirrels and the waning wind that carried

with it—was it possible?—the scent of earth. Perhaps the winter was lifting at last. That thought and the knowledge that Hundein and most of the herd had made it through a snow slide brought him much delayed peace.

The sound of urgent yipping filled the forest. Odveig squinted, listening. It was the northwestern foxes. He wondered what the crying was all about. Whatever it was, it was nothing good. They had never made so much noise. He sighed. Hoisting his own snowshoes, he made his way deeper into Gronn Forest.

There was always work to be done.