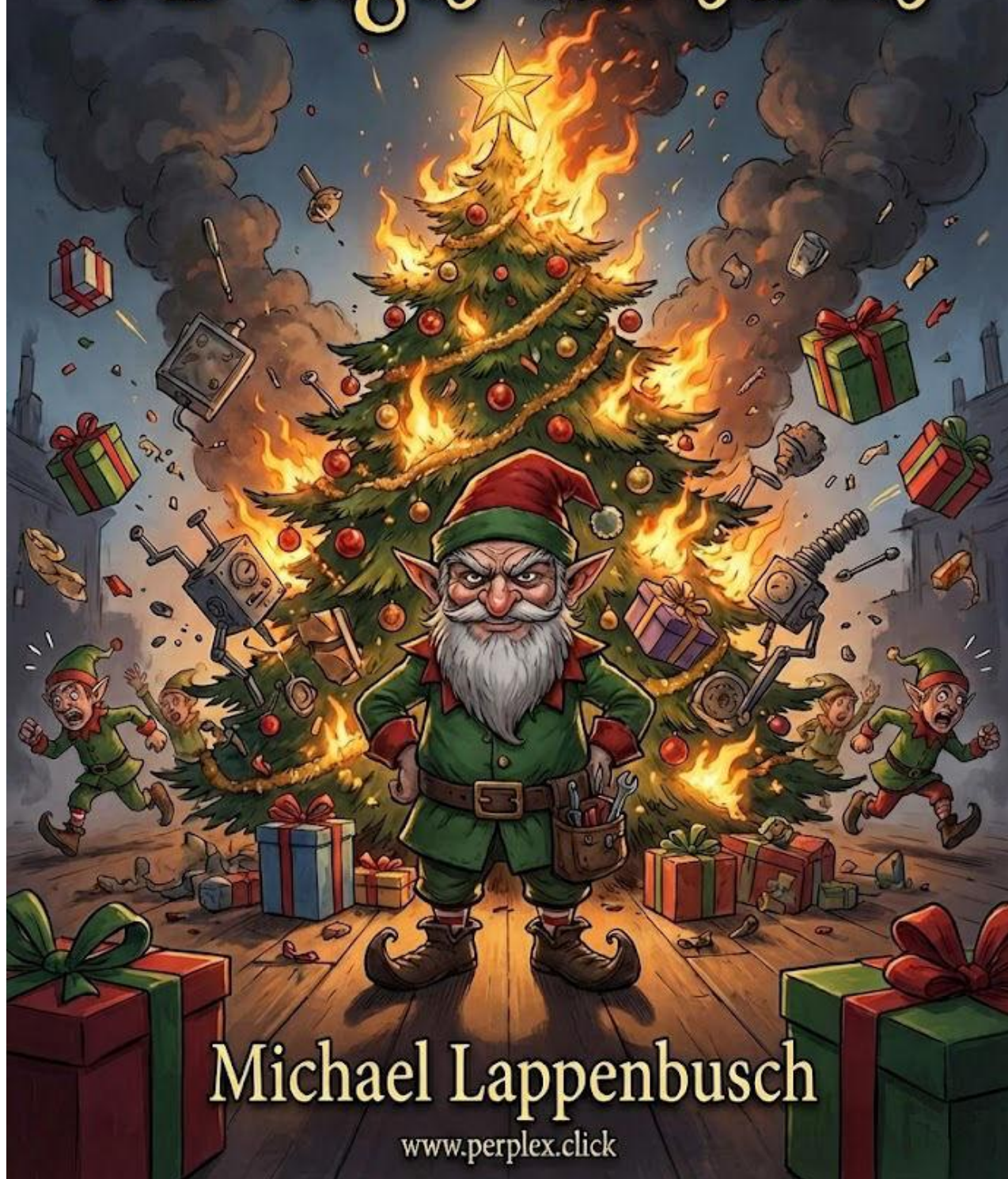


# Malrik Splitterbart Sabotages Christmas



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## Shift begins at the lighting factory

There are places where snow is simply snow. Cold, white stuff that falls on things and makes them lose their sense of order. And then there's the North Pole, where the snow has a mind of its own.

Here, it doesn't just creak. It comments. It squeaks under boots like a disgruntled sugar cube, it trickles from roof edges like the polite clearing of an old butler's throat, and when the wind picks up, it swirls around your face with such precision that you could swear it had conspired with someone beforehand.

Above it all hung the aurora borealis, green and violet, as if the sky had decided to overdo the light show tonight. It undulated like a curtain, behind which something very important was taking place. And indeed it was.

For under this sky stood the work of lights.

From the outside, it looked like the kind of building you get when you put a fairytale book inside a snow globe and then shake the globe with both hands until the pages give way. Turrets, battlements, chimneys belching smoke so busily you almost wanted to offer them a tissue. Windows that spilled warm light, as if someone inside was reciting cookie recipes and seriously thinking it was a good idea.

But the light display wasn't just pretty. It was awake.

You could hear it if you stood perfectly still. A humming deep beneath the crunch of the snow. A pulse running through the wooden planks and metal struts, as if the building had a heart and had decided to beat twice as hard at this time of year. It smelled of pine needles and cinnamon and hot oil. Of wood being cut and fabric being sewn, and something else that couldn't be named because it didn't come from the human world.

A touch of magic is hard to describe. It's like the moment before you sneeze, only instead of sneezing, you suddenly believe that you could make things better if you just tried harder.

In a side doorway, half-hidden by a pile of snowdrifts that had clearly been there for some time and would probably soon be given names, the door opened. Warm light streamed out, and with it a cloud of voices.

Elven voices. High, fast, excited. The kind of voices that start a sentence before the previous one is finished, because life is too short to wait for punctuation.

Fenna Funkel stepped out and paused in the doorway for a heartbeat, as if to reassure herself that the North Pole hadn't vanished overnight. One wouldn't have put it past her. Places with a lot of magic tend to occasionally shift their position when no one is looking. It's a quirk that's very convenient if you don't want to be found, but rather unpleasant if you have to be on time in the morning.

Fenna shrugged. The wind tugged at her scarf, as if trying to carry it away and return it later when it had had enough. She pulled her hat down further over her face, though her ears,



pointed like exclamation marks, still stuck out. Her breath rose in small puffs that immediately tried to join the Northern Lights.

She hadn't been at Lichterwerk long. New enough to still stare open-mouthed at the large doors every time, old enough to inwardly berate herself for it. And smart enough to know that there were two kinds of people at Lichterwerk: those who acted as if everything was perfectly normal, and those who actually knew what they were doing. The first kind was more dangerous.

Today was the peak shift. That meant everything ran faster. Conveyor belts rattled more busily, bells rang more frequently, and somewhere someone was singing a song that sounded as if it had gotten lost in a different rhythm while turning.

Fenna took a few steps across the yard. The snow here was packed down and glistened as if someone had polished it. Above her, the aurora borealis traced a green line that, for a fleeting moment, looked like an arrow. Perhaps she imagined it. Perhaps not.

Fenna possessed a particular kind of restlessness, one that couldn't be calmed simply by being told everything was alright. It was the restlessness of people who take things apart to see how they work, and then sometimes forget to put them back together. Fenna always put them back together. That was her job. And her pride. And occasionally, her problem.

She thought of the sled hangar, of the core that hummed there in the belly of the sled, of the small measuring instruments she had checked last night until her eyes were dry and her fingers smelled of metal. She thought of the reindeer pens, of the restless pawing she had heard the other day, as if there was something in the air that didn't belong there.

She didn't think of Malrik Splitterbart.

It wasn't because Malrik was invisible. He was very visible if you knew what to look for. But who notices an elf who moves as if he doesn't even want to leave tracks in the snow? Who remembers the face of a worker who takes his breaks in such a way that no one sees him taking them? Who asks the name of an elf who always turns up where no one cares?

The North Pole is full of people who keep the miracle going. The miracle is rude enough not to wear name tags.

Inside the light show, Fenna swallowed the warmth like soup. Her glasses fogged up immediately, and she had to take them off and wipe them with her sleeve. That was the moment the sounds really hit her.

Rolling. Clicking. Buzzing. Laughter. A short, indignant squeak, presumably indicating that someone had sat on a pin. A crackling sound, as if sugar were being caramelized somewhere, only it wasn't sugar, but the fine crackling of light dust in glass containers.

The main workshop was a forest of beams, pipes, and walkways. Strings of lights hung everywhere, but not the cozy kind. The functional kind. They weren't lit for show, but to detect fires. In one corner, stacks of wooden blocks were piled high, unaware that they would soon become model trains. In another corner lay lengths of fabric, destined to become sacks and bows once someone looked at them with sufficient seriousness and a discerning eye.

Fenna pushed her way through the crowd. Elves bustled in all directions. Some carried small boxes, some carried large boxes, some carried a box that clearly didn't want to be carried and was behaving like a stubborn child. Floating above it all were small slips of paper, hanging from strings and passed along in a complicated system of hooks and pulleys. No human would have understood the system. Elves, however, did. Most of the time.

"Fenna!"

A voice called her. Fenna turned around and saw Jaro Glanzniete, an elf who was so excited that he probably had to be switched off at night. He waved to her, and as he waved, somehow the rest of his body waved along, as if it were made of rubber.

"You're early!" Jaro exclaimed.

"I am on time," said Fenna.

"Early is punctual!" Jaro shouted. He grinned. It was the grin of a being convinced that time is a friendly pet that never runs away.

Fenna smiled back. "How's it going?"

Jaro made a dramatic gesture towards the hall, as if announcing a play. "Everything's on! Almost everything! Well... a lot of things!"

"That's a great relief to me."

"Oh, come on. It's the busy shift. There's always some creaking or groaning going on." Jaro leaned closer. "Did you hear? Two more rolls of yarn are missing from the bagging department."

"Miss?"

Jaro shrugged. "You know. They were there, and then they weren't. Maybe someone ate them."

"Yarn is not edible."

"Not with that attitude," Jaro said cheerfully, glancing over Fenna's shoulder. "Oh. And Klirr is running around."

Fenna felt her neck tense up. "Already?"

"She's always walking around. I think she sleeps while walking. She's like a shark, only smaller and with fewer teeth. But she has a look that will knock your socks off."

Fenna laughed, though it was a short, cautious laugh. Inspector Klirr had this reputation, and Klirr did nothing to disprove it. Quality control at the Lichterwerk factory wasn't just any department. It was an attitude. A point of view. A religion whose god was a ruler.

"I have to go to the hangar," Fenna said, pulling her gloves tighter. "Yesterday's readings..."

"You and your measurements," Jaro said admiringly, as if it were a romantic weakness. "Be careful you don't start weighing the snowflakes."

"If they are too heavy, the sky will fall down," said Fenna.

Jaro nodded seriously. "Good point."

Fenna kept walking, her steps in time with the machines. She liked that rhythm. It was honest. If a gear jammed, it squeaked. If a belt broke, it broke. There was no false cheerfulness in metal.

She turned a corner and passed a low workbench where an old elf sat hunched over. He was sorting small pieces of wood into precise rows, so calmly it was almost eerie. His cap sat low, his beard was gray but not fluffy. It wasn't soft. It was... angular. As if someone had carved it from dry wood and forgotten to sand it.

He briefly raised his gaze.

His eyes weren't tired. They were awake. Too awake. Like two small sparks in a furnace that should have gone out long ago.

Fenna knew him. Not personally. At Lichterwerk, you knew many people like that: as part of the landscape. Like a certain staircase that always creaks. Like a door that always sticks a little.

Malrik Splitterbart.

He nodded at her. Not friendly. Not unfriendly. Just... registering her presence. As if he remembered that she had passed by.

Fenna nodded back, because politeness is like a lubricant that keeps many things running smoothly. Then she continued walking, and the hum of the lights enveloped her again like a warm blanket.

Behind her, Malrik's hand slid very slowly under the table.

His fingers touched something small and hard. A piece of metal, barely bigger than a thumbnail. A splinter, sharp enough to snap a thread if you guided it just right.

He didn't smile.

But in his mind was something akin to a smile. It was the quiet click of a plan snapping into place, precisely when no one was listening.

And somewhere in the hall a bell rang that shouldn't have rang at all, as if the light show itself stumbled for a moment and then pretended nothing had happened, while Fenna stepped through a door beyond which lay the hangar, warm as a belly and full of sounds that promised that everything would work today because it had to, and because nobody dared to imagine what it would be like if it didn't.

The sled hangar was a place where even breathing automatically became quieter. Not because anyone told him to. But because he understood that here, one didn't make any noise that wasn't necessary.

It was a huge hall, as high as a cathedral, only without the religious icons and with considerably more tools. Chain hoists hung from the beams, and shelves full of spare parts glittered along the walls, arranged so neatly it was almost insulting. The floor was polished to a shine, not out of vanity, but because you notice problems much faster on a slippery surface. At the North Pole, a problem is often just another way of saying, "That's it for the whole thing."

The sled was in the middle.

It was bigger than Fenna had imagined it as a child. In the stories, it had always been an elegant thing: a bit of wood, a bit of magic, a few bells, and that was it. In reality, it looked as if someone had taken a ship, cut it in half, added runners, and then decided that "aerodynamic" was something to look up later.

And yet he possessed grace.

The runners curved in elegant arcs, with inlaid runic lines so fine they were only visible when the light struck at an angle. The sides were reinforced with metal strips that didn't shine, but shimmered dully, as if understated. And everywhere were small openings, flaps, hooks – all the places where something could be adjusted, replaced, or readjusted if the world had once again decided not to follow plans.

Fenna loved this sled. Not because it was "the sled." But because it was a system. A being made of wood, metal, and magic that only functioned when it was given attention. Attention was Fenna's language.

She went to the workbench at the side where her measuring case stood. The case was nothing special: leather, buckles, slightly worn. It smelled of metal and fenna, which usually meant: of oil, of cold tea, and of the dust that forms when you breathe too long near light dust.

She opened it. Instruments, neatly embedded in felt. Small scales, fine needles, glass tubes that would probably make some people want to shake them, just to see what happens. Fenna wasn't one of those people. Fenna wanted to know what would happen before it happened.

"Tomorrow," said a voice behind her.

Fenna turned around. There stood Tilo, an elf from the hangar crew, whose face always looked as if he'd just mentally walked into a wall. He held a wrench in his hand as if it were a pet that needed petting.

"Tomorrow," said Fenna. "What's the core like?"

Tilo grimaced even more. "He's... humming."

"That's his job."

"Yes. But today he's grumbling as if he's in a bad mood."

Fenna raised an eyebrow. "A sled core is in a bad mood."

"Don't say that to him," Tilo said seriously. "He hears everything."

Fenna smiled. She knew Tilo was only half-joking. Things with magic tend to behave erratically if you treat them like inanimate objects. It was as if they needed respect as a kind of lubricant. Anyone who made fun of them later ended up with a burning sleeve, saying things like, "I don't know how that happened either."

She went to the belly of the sled. There, a large cover was recessed, which could be opened if you were either very authorized or very stupid. Fenna was authorized, and she was clever enough never to interpret that authorization as an invitation to resentment.

She released the latches, flipped up the cover, and immediately felt the warmth.

The sled core lay there like a sleeping animal. An oval casing made of metallic wood – yes, that was no joke, it was a mixture that could only be achieved at the North Pole, because at the North Pole there were people who, at the mention of "metallic wood," didn't run away laughing, but asked if more of it could be made.

In the center of the core pulsed a light, golden and calm, as if counting with an internal clock. The light wasn't harsh. It was the light you see when you leave a candle burning in a house at night, because you think something in the dark might otherwise be offended.

Fenna placed a measuring device on a small contact surface. The needle trembled, stabilized, and sank slightly.

She frowned.

"Again?" she murmured.

"What?" Tilo leaned closer, without getting too close. Hangar rules: You only lean in far enough to be able to jump back if something explodes.

"The recording," said Fenna. "A little lower than yesterday."

"Maybe he's tired."

"He is a machine."

"That's what everyone says before they're chased at night by an angry toaster," said Tilo, shaking his head as if he'd already experienced something like that. He probably had. It wouldn't surprise anyone at the North Pole.

Fenna ignored the comment in the same way you ignore a snowball flying past you: you know it happened, but you don't want to give it the satisfaction of having hit you.

She checked the second measuring point. Again, slightly too low.

"That doesn't fit," said Fenna.



"What does not fit?"

"The variation," Fenna said, tapping against the scale. "If it were simply less, it would be uniformly less everywhere. But this..." She pointed to a small difference between two measurement points. "It's as if someone..."

She was searching for the right image. Fenna thought in images. Not in metaphors, but in functioning models.

"...as if someone were putting a blanket over a part of it," she finished.

Tilo blinked. "A blanket? Over the core?"

"Not literally," Fenna said. Then, because Tilo was still blinking, she added: "A layer. Something that slows down the absorption. Like... soot."

Tilo inhaled sharply. "Soot? In here?"

"If it were soot, we would see it." Fenna reached for a small lamp with a cold light and shone it over the surface of the core. Nothing. No dark film. No stain. All clean.

Too clean.

That was the problem with a device that was too clean. It was like an elf who was too polite: you eventually realize that he's hiding something, because nobody is that perfect by nature.

Fenna attached a second probe. The device hummed as if complaining. Then it displayed a value that shouldn't be complaining, but simply correct.

Fenna cursed softly.

At the North Pole, people rarely swore loudly because the walls were thin and magic was fragile. Some claimed that a well-placed curse could instantly transform a screwdriver into a spoon. There was no official proof of this. There were only a lot of spoons.

"I need to see the logbooks," Fenna said.

"They're hanging over there," Tilo said, pointing to a blackboard where a thick book was attached to a chain. The chain wasn't there to deter thieves. It was there to stop someone from throwing the book into the snow in frustration.

Fenna went over, opened the logbook, and scanned the entries. Date, time, measurements, names. All in neat handwriting. Too neat, in fact. Anyone who wrote neatly either had a lot of time on their hands or a lot of fear.

She looked at yesterday's figures. Then those from the day before yesterday. The numbers looked good. Too good. As if they'd been spruced up.

Fenna flipped back the pages, further back. She wasn't looking for major deviations. She was looking for small ones. For patterns.

There it was.

An entry that was in the wrong place. Not in terms of content. The date was correct. But the numbering in the margin – those tiny, machine-stamped numbers that marked each page – was incorrect.

Just one more.

One was nothing. One was a typo, a slip-up, an "oh well, it'll be fine." But one was also the kind of number that could derail entire worlds. A gear shifted by one tooth ultimately transforms a clockwork mechanism into an art installation.

Fenna ran her finger over the number. It was genuine. Not a forgery. No scratches. No subsequent stamping.

And yet, one page was missing.

"Tilo," she said slowly.

"Yes?"

"Did you work here yesterday?"

Tilo shook his head. "I was checking the runners. Crack inspection. You know. If you find a crack, you're either a hero or at fault."

"Who removed the kernel?"

Tilo shrugged. "No idea. Someone. The usual suspects. It's peak season. Everyone's doing everything."

That was an answer that was both harmless and terrible. "Everyone does everything" was, at the North Pole, the charming version of "Nobody knows who did what anymore, and if something goes wrong, we'll all look very serious."

Fenna closed the logbook. She felt an unpleasant sensation spreading in her stomach, as if someone had placed a small, cold stone there.

"I want to see the page," she said.

"Which side?"

"The one who is missing."

Tilo stared at her. "If she's missing, you can't see her."

"Exactly for that reason."

Tilo scratched his head. It didn't make his face any less solid, but at least it moved. "Maybe someone took it out because coffee spilled on it."

"There's no coffee here."

"Maybe because... tea."

"Tea is clear when it's bad," said Fenna.

Tilo held up the wrench like a small shield. "I just wanted to help."

Fenna exhaled. "I know."

She went back to the core. She leaned in once more, shone her light, felt, listened. The pulse of the light was there. Calm. Almost too calm. As if someone were consciously breathing evenly because they knew they were being watched.

Fenna had worked with magic many times before. Magic wasn't evil. Magic wasn't good. Magic was like fire: it did what fire does, and anyone who thought they could overcome it with a friendly smile ended up with very short sleeves.

She ran her gloved hand along an edge of the casing.

Something stuck.

So light that a less observant elf wouldn't have noticed it. A tiny scratch, a hint of resistance, as if there were a speck of dust.

Fenna pulled her hand back and looked at the glove.

A small, dark grain.

Not much. Hardly visible. But it was there, and it wasn't golden.

Fenna held it up to the light.

It swallowed the light instead of reflecting it.

"That's not good," Fenna said quietly.

Tilo stepped closer. "What is it?"

Fenna didn't answer immediately because naming things sometimes gives them power. And because, deep down, she didn't want this thing to have a name.

She closed the cover of the core, locked it as if she could thereby also seal in the problem, and turned around.

"I have to go to Klirr," she said.

Tilo made a noise somewhere between pity and panicky admiration. "Do you really want to go to Klirr voluntarily?"

"If I don't do it," Fenna said, her voice suddenly sounding firmer, "someone else will go to her. And they'll say, 'Everything's fine. Almost everything. Well... a lot.'"

Tilo grimaced. "That would be... not good."

Fenna placed the dark grain in a small glass tube, sealed it carefully, and put it in the suitcase. Then she picked up the suitcase, as if it had suddenly become heavier, and set off.

She didn't yet know that Malrik Splitterbart was standing somewhere between the workbenches at that moment, twisting a tiny blade between his fingers and doing something that at first glance appeared to be a harmless game.

If you looked closely, that was it.

A game.

But games were sometimes the most dangerous things of all, because it's easy to forget that you can lose when you're playing games.

Fenna gripped the suitcase so tightly that you'd think it wanted to escape. Perhaps it did. Some objects develop an astonishingly good sense of when they're in trouble. And a glass vial full of dark grains was exactly the kind of trouble that wasn't content to stay confined to a suitcase.

On her way to quality control, she walked through corridors that seemed to be constantly changing, because elves left things wherever they could find space, and "space" at the North Pole was a philosophical question. You didn't stumble over boxes, you stumbled over decisions. Around one corner, a conveyor belt rattled so fast that the packages on it looked as if they were fleeing in terror. At another corner, an elf stood holding up a toy horse as if it were a work of art he had personally carved from the wood of a particularly musical tree.

"Look, Fenna! It's neighing!"

The horse did indeed neigh. However, it sounded as if it had just received some very bad news.

"Wonderful," said Fenna, without stopping. "Make sure it doesn't bite anyone."

"It's a toy!"

"I thought the same thing about a teapot the other day."

The elf watched her go as if she had just claimed that gravity was a fad.

The closer she got to quality control, the more orderly the world became. That was no accident. Order is contagious when it emanates from people who spread it with sufficient vigor. The fairy lights hung straight. The tool hooks were labeled. Even the air here seemed to smell less of cinnamon and more of judgment.

A sign on the door read: QUALITY CONTROL. Below it, a small handwritten note read: PLEASE DON'T PANIC. IT WON'T HELP.

Fenna knocked. Once. Twice.

"Come in," came the reply from inside.

The room beyond was smaller than the workshops, but more intimidating in its own way. No noise, no chaos. Just shelves with samples, measuring instruments, test labels in small boxes, and a large table with a lamp burning on it, its light so cold you wondered why it wasn't sold as ice cream.

Inspector Klirr sat behind the table.

It was immediately clear why she bore that name. Her voice didn't clang. It didn't clang like chains or teeth or anything like that. It clanged with precision. With the sound a glass plate makes when you just barely nudge it, and everyone in the room falls silent, knowing something might break.

Klirr wasn't tall. But she had a way of being in a room that made size unnecessary. Her hair was pulled back tightly, her ears pointed like the end of a pencil, and her eyes looked as if they could read the flawed grain through wood.

She didn't look up when Fenna entered. She continued writing for another moment, as if she needed to finish the sentence before accepting a new problem. Then she put down her pen, slowly, as if she were disciplining him.

"Sparkle," she said.

Fenna swallowed. "Inspector."

"You should be in the hangar."

"Was I."

"You should stay there."

Fenna placed the suitcase on the table, carefully, as if it had a vicious spirit. "It's about the sled core."

Klirr raised an eyebrow. It was a tiny movement, but it had the weight of an avalanche. "When it comes to the core, usually the hangar master shows up. Or Santa Claus. Or a fire."

"It's not a fire yet," said Fenna.

"That's reassuring," Klirr said, but it wasn't reassuring. "Why are you here?"

Fenna opened the suitcase and took out the glass vial. She placed it between them. The dark grain inside lay there like a tiny star that had decided to spin in the wrong direction.

"It was stuck to the casing," Fenna said. "And a page is missing from the logbook. And the recording values are... incorrect."

Klirr didn't take the tube immediately. She stared at it, as if she could make it confess the truth through eye contact. Then she reached for tweezers, as if the grain were contagious, and held the tube up to the light.

The grain was still absorbing the light, as if it were hungry.

"Interesting," said Klirr.

The word sounded to her like a verdict.

"Is it...?" Fenna broke off.

"You say it," said Klirr.

Fenna inhaled. "It looks like soot. But not normal soot. It's... too thick. Too still."

Klirr nodded slowly. "That's a good description of something you don't want anywhere near magic."

Fenna felt her fingers getting wet. "What is it?"

Klirr put down the tube, picked up a small testing device – a kind of magnifying glass with engraved runes – and applied it. The device hummed softly. Then it cracked, as if offended.

Klirr didn't flinch. That was the unsettling thing. Anyone at the North Pole who didn't flinch had either already seen everything or was in the process of understanding something very bad.

"Resentment," she finally said.

The word fell into the room like a stone into still water. Fenna had heard it. Of course she had. Every elf had heard of it, just as every elf had heard of wolves in the forest. They knew they existed, and yet they still went out at night because they had to.

"But..." Fenna searched for the right objection. "That's... a legend."

"No," said Klirr. "That's an excuse."

Fenna felt her stomach clench. "How does it get to the core?"

Klirr looked up. Now she was looking directly at Fenna, and that look was so sharp it could probably cut paper. "With one hand. Deliberately."

"Is someone sabotaging the sled?"

"Someone is sabotaging more than that," Klirr said quietly. "If there's soot in the factory, it's not there by chance. Someone has manufactured it or brought it in. Both are... elaborate."

Fenna felt a small, cold pride. She hadn't gone crazy. The values hadn't lied. The core wasn't in a "bad mood." It had been made ill.

"What do we do?" she asked.



Klirr leaned back and clasped her hands. "First, we won't panic. Because panic is like fat: it burns well and it stinks. Second, we'll find out where this is coming from. Third..." She let the word hang in the air, as if considering it.

Fenna waited.

"Thirdly," said Klirr, "I'm keeping you away from all important things until I know if you're part of the problem."

Fenna swallowed. "What?"

Klirr raised his hand. "Not because I think you did it. But because someone wants you to look like you did. And if I don't take that into account, I'm bad at my job."

Fenna wanted to protest. She wanted to say that she had read the measurements, that she only wanted to help, that she didn't have time for power games. But Klirr was right, and that was the worst kind of right.

"Someone has tampered with the logbook," Fenna said. "The missing page..."

Klirr nodded. "I will have the books secured."

"And the core?"

"The core remains locked," Klirr said. "No one touches it except under supervision. And now you go back to the hangar and act as if everything is normal."

"How am I supposed to pretend everything is normal?" Fenna heard the harshness in her voice and immediately hated her for it.

Klirr looked at her. Then, surprisingly, her gaze softened slightly. Not warm. More like... less cold.

"Because everything has to be normal," she said. "If the others notice that something is wrong, the factory becomes unsettled. And unsettling is..." She pointed to the test tube. "...feeding."

Fenna exhaled slowly. She nodded.

Klirr grabbed a small stamp, pressed it onto a form that Fenna hadn't even seen, and slid it towards her. "This tube stays here. And you don't say the word you just said to anyone."

"Resentment."

Klirr blinked. "Exactly."

Fenna took the form, didn't know what to do with it, and stuffed it into the suitcase, which now felt somewhat offended.

As she walked towards the door, Klirr said behind her: "Sparkle."

Fenna stopped.

"If you find anything else," said Klirr, "you'll come to me. Immediately. No matter who tells you to leave it alone."

Fenna turned around. "And what if someone tries to stop me?"

Klirr smiled. It wasn't a friendly smile. It was the smile of someone who knew where the bars were.

"Then you stop him," said Klirr.

Fenna went out, and the door clicked shut behind her. For a moment she stood in the hallway and heard again the distant hum of the lights. It sounded exactly the same as before. Warm. Busy. Confident.

She knew now that it wasn't that.

As Fenna walked back towards the hangar, a shadow moved somewhere in the workshops among the strings of lights. An elf stood at a workbench, bent over a row of small pieces of wood, his fingers working quickly, quietly, and precisely.

Malrik Splitterbart dropped a tiny metal shaving into a box. It didn't sound like metal. It sounded like a promise.

In the sack department, a thread broke at the same time, so fine it was barely visible. A sack got a hole, so small that no one noticed. And the first gift that would later fall into it didn't yet know that it would never reach the world.

Above the light display, the aurora borealis formed a new wave. Green, violet, beautiful.

And somewhere a bell rang just once, too early.

## The elf who doesn't laugh

One might have thought Malrik Splitterbart was simply in a bad mood. That was the convenient explanation one uses for people who are unpleasant, but not unpleasant enough to be taken seriously. "Ah, Malrik," the elves would say, clutching cups of tea with both hands as if the tea would give them courage. "He just doesn't laugh."

As if laughter were a chore. As if it were a tool you take out of the drawer in the morning, oil briefly, and then dutifully use before putting it away again.

Malrik didn't laugh because laughter is a sound you make when you believe the world is on your side.

The world was rarely on Malrik's side. The world didn't even like being near him.

He sat at his worktable, which stood so inconspicuously in a niche that it could easily have been mistaken for a piece of furniture. Some elves didn't even know there was a table there. They only noticed that sometimes things got finished that somehow needed to be finished, and that it was impolite to ask too many questions when something worked.

Before him lay pieces of wood. Small, cleanly cut pieces that would soon become wheels, roof ridges, or tiny draft excluders. The wood smelled of resin and winter, and of the quiet pride of a tree that hadn't grown in vain. Malrik valued wood. Wood didn't lie. Wood didn't pretend to be happier than it was. Wood creaked when it creaked, and broke when it broke. It was honest.

It wasn't always the elves.

He took a piece, turned it between his fingers, and examined the grain as if reading it. In a way, he did. He saw the pattern, the tension, the tiny spot where a splinter would later break off with just a little nudge. Then he placed the piece in a row, exactly next to the others. Precision was important. Precision was reassuring. Precision was what the cheerful disorder in the light installation didn't understand: order is not the opposite of chaos. Order is the form that chaos takes when forced long enough.

Beside his table lay a small box that looked like a harmless box for nails. It was closed with a simple lid, no lock, no runes, no dramatic seal. Malrik didn't need drama. Drama was for people who wanted attention.

He wanted results.

He opened the box a crack and looked inside. Metal shavings. Tiny, shimmering flakes. A few wood splinters. A dark dust, so fine it choked the light. Things other elves considered dirt. Malrik considered them words. Each shaving was a sentence. Each splinter a period.

He closed the box again and stroked the lid as if calming an animal.

"Everything's going well," he heard a voice call out somewhere. Cheerfully. A little too loudly.

Malrik paused. Not because he was frightened, but because he was listening, the way one listens when someone nearby is telling a lie and one has to decide whether to correct it or use it.

He had known this place for a long time. So long, in fact, that the years no longer felt like years to him, but like shifts. A shift was a day, a week, a month, sometimes an entire decade, in which the same lights always burned and the same songs were always sung. It was an eternal December, an eternal "It's almost here," and anyone who stayed in it too long forgot what a normal year felt like. Malrik hadn't forgotten. He had simply decided that a normal year was overrated. A normal year held too many hopes.

Hopes were expensive. And Malrik was, to put it kindly, thrifty.

To put it less kindly, he was a miser. A true master of holding on. He held on to things other elves threw away: screws that were only slightly bent, pieces of wood that were just a tad too short, scraps of fabric that could still be made into something if one were creative enough.

And above all, he held on to what couldn't be packed into boxes: resentments, disappointments. A certain word someone had once uttered when Malrik was young and believed that good work would automatically be noticed.

The word was: "Interchangeable."

It wasn't even meant maliciously. That was the worst part. It had been said casually, as if in passing, "The snow is cold." An observation. Not a knife. And yet Malrik had felt it like a blade.

Interchangeable meant: You are not important. Replaceable meant: If you don't come tomorrow, someone else will take your tools and continue working, and nobody will notice the difference, except perhaps that it suddenly smells less like you.

Malrik had smiled back then. Back then, he even sometimes laughed. A polite laugh that showed he wanted to belong.

He remembered vividly the day when laughter had fallen silent within him.

It wasn't a big, dramatic moment. No thunder, no lightning, no oath in the snow. It was more like a candle you forget to blow out, and which then eventually goes out by itself. You only notice it when you turn around and it's suddenly darker than you thought.

He had been working on a gift that was important. A special toy, a unique piece, a commission that required more magic than usual. It was to be for a child who didn't have much but dreamed big. Malrik had put in the effort. Not the ordinary effort. The kind that leaves your fingertips rough and your back aching, but you keep going because you believe it's worth it.

Then something went wrong. Not through Malrik's hand. Through a flaw in the material, through carelessness elsewhere, through an oversight that was later called "regrettable." The toy was finished too late. The sled started without it. The child got nothing.

A child who dreamed a lot had learned that night that dreams sometimes don't come true.

The next day, the hall was filled with an awkward silence. There was no punishment, no anger. Just that uncomfortable feeling that spreads when everyone knows something has gone wrong, but no one wants to say exactly who is to blame, because blame always sticks to your hands. And then someone had approached Malrik, kindly, with that kind of friendly voice you use when you don't want to hurt anyone, but still need to clear things up.

"You're good," the eleven had said. "Really. But in the future we need to... well... plan more securely. More backup. You know. In case you get injured. You're... replaceable."

It was that word again. And again, it wasn't meant maliciously.

Malrik had nodded. He had even smiled. He had said, "Of course." And something inside him had gone quiet. Not angry. Not sad. Just empty.

Emptiness is dangerous because it leaves space. And Malrik filled that space. With something warmer than emptiness, but colder than joy.

He filled it intentionally.

The intention had initially been small. A tiny tweak here. A misplaced part there. Things that would later be called "human," even though elves did them. A little friction in the gears, a little sand in the lubrication. Just to see what would happen. Just to prove that he was irreplaceable. Because if something went wrong because of him, he would be noticed.

The problem was: if you start testing the system, the system will eventually test back.

Malrik had learned to be patient. Patience was his greatest virtue, and also his greatest wickedness. Other elves wanted immediate results. They wanted a toy to bounce right away, a train to run immediately, a song to sound like a warm blanket. Malrik didn't like warm blankets. Warmth only made him unable to think clearly.

He liked the cold. Cold made everything sharper. Cold revealed cracks.

He took a new piece of wood, placed the knife against it, and carved a tiny notch. It was so small that no one would see it. But it was there. And eventually, it would mean that a wheel wasn't running quite true. And a wheel that isn't running quite true means that a wagon squeaks. And a wagon that squeaks means that someone is turning around. And someone who turns around means that they're missing something they shouldn't miss.

That's how it began. Not with a bang. With a squeak.

Malrik put the piece down, closed his eyes for a moment, and listened to the music. The humming, the rattling, the distant laughter. He imagined what it would be like if that laughter fell silent. Not because someone forbade it, but because no one wanted to laugh anymore.

He opened his eyes again. They were clear.

An elf walked by, glanced briefly in his direction, and nodded—out of politeness, out of habit, out of reflex to be on good terms with anyone who might one day have a screwdriver he needed. Malrik nodded back. He was being polite. Politeness was a great disguise.

Then he reached under the table and pulled out something that at first glance looked like an ordinary tool. A small blade. A lever. A piece of metal with an inconspicuous hook.

A tool that could be used to remove a page from a logbook without looking like violence. More like an accident. Like an unfortunate mistake that unfortunately happens when there's so much to do.

Malrik looked at it, turned it between his fingers, and put it away again.

He had time. Peak shift or not, Christmas was a big deal. It didn't move fast. It just moved relentlessly.

And Malrik Splitterbart had never intended to stop it by jumping in its way.

He just wanted it to stumble.

If you work in a building long enough, you begin to know it like an animal. You know which floorboards creak, which doors only open if you whisper sweet nothings to them beforehand, and which pipes make noises at night that you don't want to hear when you're alone and trying to convince yourself that you're a rational being.

Malrik knew the light installation like a hunter knows a forest.

He knew not only the routes, but also the pauses between the sounds. He knew when the large conveyor belt in the east wing briefly stalled because a gear was rubbing against a belt that should have been replaced three winters ago. He knew that the bell above the packing area always rang three seconds too early because someone had probably laughed during its installation. He knew that the air in the wish list archive smelled different, a little like paper, a little like dust, and a little like longing that had lain on shelves for too long.

And above all, he knew how elves moved.

Elves had this amazing reflex to do things without thinking, because they had done them a thousand times before. And a thousand times is roughly the number after which a movement loses its soul and becomes nothing more than routine. Routine is practical. Routine is fast. Routine is also the gateway for people patient enough to position themselves between routine and result.

Malrik stood up, put his pieces of wood into a box that looked like any other box, and left.

He didn't walk like someone secretly planning something. He walked like someone with a task. It's a subtle but important distinction. Someone who moves stealthily attracts attention. Someone who moves with a sense of purpose goes unnoticed.

He carried a small bag at his side. Tools rattled in this bag, as tools usually do. Nobody found this surprising. Tools rattled everywhere in the light factory, and anyone who questioned every rattle would never have finished building anything.

Except that not all of Malrik's tools were meant for fixing things.

He weaved his way through the factory hall, nodding here, muttering a "morning" there, and trying hard not to seem too friendly. Friendliness was suspicious. Anyone who was too friendly at the North Pole usually wanted something. Or had done something wrong.

He passed the sack department and stopped there as if he'd only stumbled upon it by chance. The sack department was a labyrinth of lengths of fabric, sewing machines, and elves who sewed so fast you wondered if they still had eyes or were simply relying on instinct. Sacks of various sizes hung everywhere, from "a teddy bear will fit" to "a fully grown polar bear will fit if he sits politely."

A young elf, who had the kind of face that had not yet learned to be suspicious, was holding up a sack and examining the seam.

"Too relaxed," said the eleven-man next to him sternly.

"Too hard," said the eleven on the other side.



The sack was caught in between and probably just wanted to exist.

Malrik stepped closer. "Tomorrow."

The three elves nodded. One of them, an elfess with a pincushion on her arm, looked at Malrik as if trying to remember whether he was one of those people you could ask, or one of those you'd rather pretend you hadn't seen.

"Do you need anything?" she finally asked. Her voice was friendly. Too friendly. She was probably new or had never experienced a real mistake.

"Just thread," said Malrik. "The coarse one. The one with the darker core."

"Dark core?" she repeated, frowning.

"For tow hooks," said Malrik. That made sense. Everything at the North Pole eventually needs a tow hook.

The elf reached under the table and pulled out a roll. Malrik took it, as one accepts a gift one doesn't want but can't refuse. He nodded gratefully, turned, and left.

No one noticed that when he picked up the spool, he briefly brushed his thumb along the edge. No one noticed that a tiny speck of dark dust clung to the rough surface, where the thread would later unwind. No one noticed how Malrik's fingers then discreetly wiped his trousers, as if he had merely removed dust.

That was the beauty of tiny grains. They looked like nothing.

Malrik lingered nearby for another moment, as if considering whether he needed anything else. He listened to the hum of the sewing machines. He didn't like the sound. It was too cheerful, too hurried, as if the machines thought that with enough speed they could stitch away problems.

Then he continued walking.

He knew the thread wouldn't break immediately. That would have been clumsy. Clumsiness was for impatient people or those with too much pride. Malrik was neither. The dark core in the thread wouldn't weaken him, it would only make him... tired. Threads were like people: they could endure a lot, but they didn't last forever. And when a thread was a little tired, one wrong move, one pull too quickly, a sewing machine that had to run faster today, and suddenly there was a small hole.

A hole that nobody saw.

A hole that is only noticed when something falls.

Malrik strolled on as if he were on his way to another errand. He passed a shelf covered with small bells. Bells were everywhere in the light factory because, without them, you eventually forget you're in a place meant to be cheerful. Malrik considered bells the acoustic equivalent of icing: pretty, sticky, and if you get too much of it, you get a headache.

He picked up a small bell, jingled it between his fingers, and put it back. Nobody noticed. Elves are always touching things. It's their way of understanding the world. And sometimes, if you're unlucky, it's someone else's way of changing the world.

Further back in the hall stood a large box of wooden strips. Next to it lay a small pile of sawdust. Malrik stopped, bent down, picked up a strip, and his face took on the expression seen on people who pretend to be very carefully checking whether something is straight.

He was actually checking something.

Not the ledge.

But the surroundings.

Two elves were carrying a heavy box by, discussing whether it was possible to make chocolate in the shape of snowflakes without them looking like wet tissues. A third elf cursed under his breath because he couldn't untie a knot in the ribbon. A fourth laughed so loudly it was almost suspicious.

Nobody looked at Malrik.

Perfect.

He put the shelf back and, seemingly out of carelessness, a tiny piece of wood splintered off. The splinter landed in the sawdust, invisible. Malrik bent down as if to pick something up, and his hand disappeared into the pile for a moment. When he stood up again, the splinter was in his pocket.

Splinters were useful. Splinters were small, mobile problems. Splinters always found a place to cause trouble. A splinter in the wrong finger meant an elf was distracted for one second too long. One second isn't much. But Christmas is a chain of seconds.

He continued towards the side corridor, where one rarely encountered anyone. There were doors there, behind which things were stored that weren't needed daily: old decorations, spare parts, signs that had been hung up at some point and then never taken down again because their purpose had been forgotten. One of these rooms was the small storage room, where rolls, boxes, and special parts were piled high, all labeled.

Malrik stepped inside. It smelled of cardboard, glue, and the subtle stress of things that know they will soon be needed.

In the corner stood a small cart with sheets of labels. The sheets were finely printed in clean script, each line a destination, each number a promise that a gift would reach its intended destination.

Promises, Malrik thought, are the first thing people break when things get tough.

He took a sheet, held it up to the light, and put it back. He took a second. Put it back again. He didn't do this because he needed the labels. He did it because he knew someone would count later to see if everything was there. Nobody counted to see if everything was in the right order.

He slipped a bow between two others. Just a little. Enough that later, an elf in a hurry would grab the wrong one. Enough that a number would be off by one. Enough that a gift would end up somewhere else.

It wasn't necessary to destroy everything. It was only necessary to destroy the feeling that everything was going well.

As Malrik left the room, he heard footsteps.

He didn't turn around. He didn't stop. He simply walked on as if he had done nothing, because he hadn't done anything that could be proven.

He heard a voice behind him, bright and surprised.

"Oh! Malrik!"

Jaro shiny rivets. Naturally.

Jaro was the kind of elf you always hear about before you see him. Malrik considered him a natural disaster of good humor.

"Tomorrow," said Malrik.

"You were in the supply room!" Jaro sounded as if he had caught Malrik doing something exciting, like breathing.

"Yes," said Malrik.

"Do you need anything?"

"No."

"Ah!" Jaro nodded eagerly. "Good! I just thought... because Klirr is running around and—"

"There's always a lot of clattering going on," said Malrik. It wasn't a complaint. It was an observation.

Jaro laughed. "Yes, that's right. She's like... like..."

"Like clanging," said Malrik.

Jaro blinked as if he had just tried to solve a very simple puzzle and failed. "Yes! Exactly!"

He grinned. Malrik didn't grin back. Not out of malice. More out of discipline. Grinning is a leak. Whoever grins lets something out.

"Everything's going well, right?" asked Jaro, rocking on his tiptoes.

Malrik looked at him. Saw the honest, childlike trust in that face. Saw how Jaro believed in Christmas, not as a machine, but as a feeling.

Malrik answered truthfully.

"Everything is going well," he said.

And in his mind he added: Just in the wrong direction.

Malrik was back at his table before anyone even thought to ask where he'd been. That was a skill you don't find in a manual. You don't learn it by being taught how to make yourself invisible. You learn it by being overlooked long enough to realize that being overlooked isn't just a state of being, it's a tool.

He sat down, placed his hands on the wood, and waited a moment until the hall felt as if it had never missed him.

The tapestry of sound rolled on: sewing machines whirred, conveyor belts rattled, a crate clanged somewhere, and someone laughed so loudly that even the fairy lights flickered briefly, as if in protest. Malrik imagined what it would be like if these sounds suddenly stopped. Not in a dramatic "everything explodes" moment, but in a quiet, creeping silence, like when a bird in a cage realizes that no one is listening anymore and stops singing.

He liked the idea. It was... tidy.

In his mind, Christmas wasn't a cozy celebration. It was a machine. A huge, gleaming machine, kept running by sweat, sleep deprivation, hope, and an astonishing amount of glue. Everyone acted as if it were magic alone. Malrik knew better. Magic was just the oil. The gears were elves.

And gears can be braked.

He pulled the small bag closer and took out the box. He opened it only a little, just enough to peek inside. The dark dust lay there as if it had deliberately tried to blend in. Malrik put the lid back on. He wasn't sentimental about his things, but he was careful. Sentimentality blinds. Caution makes you effective.

He grabbed a piece of wood and began to carve. Not because he had something to finish, but because carving calmed him, and because a calm saboteur can do more damage than an angry one.

While he was carving, he heard footsteps. Light, quick, decisive.

Fenna Funkel.

She didn't go directly to him. She walked past, her suitcase in hand, her face tense in that concentrated way that Malrik had always hated in young elves. Not because concentration was bad, but because it held hope within it. Hope is the worst kind of naiveté, because it always mistakes itself for wisdom.

Fenna was one of those people who noticed things. That alone made her dangerous. Most elves saw the light installation as a home. Fenna saw it as a device. She didn't just hear the humming; she listened to see if it was humming in the wrong place.

Malrik looked up just long enough to register her presence. She didn't see him. Or she pretended not to, which ultimately amounted to the same thing: she wasn't giving him any attention. Attention was food. No attention was camouflage.

He let them pass, feeling something almost like a small, unpleasant sting. It wasn't fear. Malrik wasn't afraid. Fear is an emotion. Malrik didn't work with emotions, but with probabilities.

Probability one: Fenna had seen something.

Probability number two: She wouldn't forget it.

Probability three: She would talk to someone who felt important enough to listen.

Malrik knew how to handle it. He wasn't so foolish as to believe he could sabotage an entire system without someone eventually pulling the strings. You don't plan something like that by hoping no one will be looking. You plan it by deciding where they'll be looking when they do look.

He continued carving. The piece of wood took shape: a small wheel, clean, round, almost perfect.

Almost perfect is often worse than broken. Broken is noticeable. Almost perfect lasts long enough to be truly worthwhile.

He placed the wheel in the box, reached for the next piece of wood, and paused.

A noise. Not in the hall. Not loud. More like a quiet clicking behind him.

The small drawer under his table.

Malrik didn't turn his head immediately. He waited, knowing that quick movements give people away. Then he turned slowly and looked to the side.

The drawer was closed.

Of course it was. Whoever had just thought of it hadn't been foolish enough to actually open it. Or someone had opened it and closed it again so quickly that almost no one had heard.

Almost no one.

Malrik stood up as if he had only wanted to stretch his back. He took a step to the side, opened the drawer, and looked inside.

Everything was still there: the small lever with the inconspicuous hook, the thin blade, the spare stamp, a few scraps of paper whose contents were incomprehensible unless you knew what they referred to. A clean, quiet toolbox for messy, quiet work.

Only one thing was different.

A piece of paper was no longer lying exactly as he had placed it. It had shifted by a fraction of a second, so slightly that no one would notice unless they scrutinized every millimeter of their world.

Malrik closed the drawer again. He felt something smooth out inside him, as if a knife were sliding back into its sheath.

Someone had touched his things.

That was rude.

He went back to his seat and sat down. His face remained calm. His breathing remained even. But in his mind, a new little cog shifted into place.

He didn't need to react immediately. Reacting immediately is for people who are agitated. Malrik wasn't agitated. He was prepared.

He looked around the hall without focusing his gaze. This was a technique learned when observing snowstorms: if you look directly at them, you only see white. If you look at the edges, you see movement.

There, at the edge, Fenna could be seen again. She was standing with another elf, talking, gesturing, pointing at her suitcase. Her body was tense. It was the gesturing of someone who wanted to explain that something was wrong, but couldn't say exactly what.

Interesting, thought Malrik.

So that was the kind of problem Fenna was. Not the kind that panics and screams. The kind that becomes quieter and more precise.

Malrik took a new piece of wood and carved while he thought. His fingers worked as if they were independent of his mind. Sometimes they were.

If Fenna was a trail, he didn't need to cut it off. That would be too obvious. He just needed to redirect it.

He opened the box a crack and took a tiny grain between his thumb and forefinger. It felt like dust, but it had weight, as if it had been compressed in a fit of bad temper. He dropped it onto a scrap of fabric lying next to his tools. A remnant, nothing special, a piece from the textile department that might one day have ended up as a handkerchief.

The dark spot almost disappeared into the tissue.

Almost.

Malrik folded the piece of fabric and put it in his pocket.

A small gift for the future.

He got up again and this time didn't go to the supply room. He went back to the sack department, but didn't go in. He stayed at the edge, where the air smelled of yarn and haste.



Elves were sewing, cutting, tying bows, and pulling seams. Everything was happening quickly. High-pressure shift.

The peak shift is the time when mistakes are most likely to occur.

Malrik watched the hands. Hands that pulled. Hands that pushed. Hands that guided fabric over edges without looking. Hands that believed in their work so much that they forgot that work sometimes backfires.

He waited until the elf with the pincushion briefly looked up to call out to someone. At that precise moment, Malrik approached, placed a spool of thread on the table as if he had forgotten it, and let his bag bump lightly against the fabric.

A harmless bump. Nothing. A moment no one remembered.

But at that moment, the folded piece of fabric with the dark spot slipped out of the bag, fell into a basket of scraps, and disappeared among a thousand other pieces of fabric.

Malrik picked up the spool of thread again, muttered "sorry" in a tone so neutral that no one bothered to respond, and left.

That was all.

No knife. No hole. No dramatic laughter of sabotage. Just a piece of fabric in the wrong place.

Later, someone would take that piece of fabric, sew it into a sack, and the dark spot would sit there like a sleeping eye. The sack wouldn't tear immediately. It wouldn't catch fire right away. It would just be a little different. A little more weary. A little less willing to hold together when the presents are heavy and the night is cold.

And at some point, when a sack rushes through the air, when the wind tugs at it, when the sled flies over a forest and everything depends on the fabric remaining fabric, then that very sack would forget for a brief breath that it has to hold.

Malrik went back to his table, and in his mind everything fell back into place.

He wasn't a monster, he told himself. He was a corrective. A counterweight. Christmas had grown too big, too self-assured, too complacent. It needed a pebble in its shoe to remind it that it had feet.

And if a few things got broken in the process, well, so be it.

Things always broke.

That was the most honest tradition of all.

Malrik sat down, continued carving, and listened to the play of lights as if he were listening to a song he had heard so often that he knew every note.

Except that he now knew exactly where it was easiest to throw it off.

## A hole in the bag

It began as disasters often do: with a noise so small that nobody took it seriously.

A soft scraping sound.

Not the dramatic rip of a curtain tearing in a bad play because someone is too enthusiastic about playing the hero. More like the rip of a thread politely taking its leave because it's had enough. A sound heard a thousand times a day in the lighthouse when someone pulled too hard, or drove a needle through fabric too fast, or a sack refused to behave like a sack.

The elves in the sack department heard it too.

They heard it—and simultaneously heard twenty other noises, all vying for attention. Sewing machines whirled, scissors snipped, boxes clattered, and somewhere a bell jingled, dangling from a string and clearly unsure when to stop. The high-load shift was a chorus, and every sound was convinced it was the solo voice.

"Thread!" someone shouted.

"Is there any yarn left?" someone else shouted.

"Who has seen the template for the large bags?"

"The one that says BIG, or the one that says VERY BIG?"

"The one that isn't the one with the reindeer spot!"

"The one with the reindeer spot was never official!"

Fenna came through the curtain of fabric panels that separated the sack department from the rest of the factory hall and was immediately struck by the smell: cotton, linen, a hint of wax, and that one, hard-to-explain tone of hecticness that clings to fabric like smoke.

She wasn't here because she loved sacks. Fenna loved systems, and sacks, in her eyes, were the most uninteresting system in the world: they were literally only there to hold things. That was their entire purpose in life. They had no gears, no runic lines, no measurements that could be elegantly entered into tables.

And that's precisely why they were dangerous.

Because when something is so simple that it's taken for granted, nobody pays attention. And "nobody pays attention" is the natural breeding ground for problems.

Fenna had left the hangar because she couldn't simply sit there with the knowledge of the dark spot in her head, as if it were an annoying slap in the face to be ignored. Klirr had told her to pretend everything was normal. Fenna was willing to try. But normality is hard when you see the cracks.

And now there was this rattle.

"What happened?" asked Fenna.

Jaro Glanzniete, who was of course also there, turned to her. He had a roll of tape in his hand and looked as if he could tie up someone with it, if necessary, who tried to get into the Christmas spirit too early.

"Nothing!" he said with the enthusiasm of an elf who still believes that the word "nothing" frightens away problems. "Well... almost nothing."

"This is unacceptable, Jaro."

"Yes, yes. It's the state just before everything turns out well."

Fenna looked past him. In the middle of the room stood an elf with the pincushion on her arm – the same one who had given Malrik thread earlier, only now she didn't look friendly, but as if she had just been told that cinnamon was sold out.

She held up a sack. It was a large sack, the kind you could easily throw a whole pile of stuffed animals into without them weighing each other down. And there was a small hole in the side seam.

Really small. A hole that could have been covered with a thumb.

But it was there.

And everyone in the room looked at it as if it had just shouted "Boo!"

"How did this happen?" Fenna asked, more to herself than to anyone else.

"That's the question," said the elf with the pincushion, holding the sack so that the hole gleamed in the workshop light. "I sewed it as always. Double seam. Diagonal stitching. Everything correct."

"Perhaps you—" began an elf who always sounded as if he liked to distribute blame because he didn't want to keep any himself.

"I don't!" snapped the elf, and her needle flashed in a way that made it very clear that it was best not to argue with her if you valued your fingers.

Fenna stepped closer and bent over the seam. Her eyes weren't those of a romantic. They were those of a mechanic. They were searching for the point where the system had ceased to be a system.

The seam was neat. In fact, neater than necessary. The thread was tight. Not too tight. Not too loose.

The hole was not caused by a bad seam.

It looked more like someone had tired the fabric from the inside out. As if the fabric had suddenly decided it no longer wanted to be fabric.

Fenna gently ran a finger over the area. The fabric felt normal, but not quite. It was slightly rougher, as if there were a grain embedded in the weave.

"Where does the cut come from?" Fenna asked.

"From the basket," said the elf, pointing to a large basket full of pieces of fabric that looked like snowflakes if snowflakes were square and smelled of cotton.

Fenna went to the basket and reached inside. She pulled out a piece of fabric and held it up to the light. Nothing. A second. A third.

Then she saw it.

A tiny dot. So small that it could be mistaken for a shadow. But Fenna knew by now what shadows looked like when they weren't just shadows.

She held the fabric closer to the lamp. The spot absorbed the light. Not as dramatically as the grain on the sled core, but enough to make her neck feel that unpleasant cold sensation again.

"Who moved this basket last?" asked Fenna.

"Moved?" Jaro repeated. "No one. It's standing still."

"Everything is there," said Fenna. "Until it's no longer there."

The elves looked at her. Their gaze held that mixture of respect and mistrust one feels towards people who begin to see things that others would rather not see.

The elf with the pincushion approached Fenna. "Is that... dirt?"

Fenna shook her head, though she wasn't sure. She didn't want to say the word Klirr had forbidden. Words are like matches: some only light when you speak them.

"It is... something," said Fenna.

"There's always something somewhere," said the blame-shifting eleven, who apparently didn't want to give up. "We're in the middle of production. If you examine every spot, we won't be finished next year."

"Then we might not be finished at all next year," Fenna said, and she could hear how harsh it sounded. But a busy shift wasn't the time for gentle words.

She turned the piece of fabric over and rubbed it with her thumb. The dot remained. It wasn't just on top. It was inside.

"That's what the fabric is for," Fenna murmured.

The elf suddenly looked pale. "The fabric is new. It was delivered yesterday. Fresh from the spinning mill."

“Fresh,” Fenna repeated, thinking of the dark core in the thread that Malrik had retrieved. Of the materials room. Of the sheets of labels. Of the way things in the light factory could wander anywhere if you just gave them a gentle enough nudge.

“We need to check the cuts,” said Fenna.

“All of them?” Jaro asked, and his enthusiasm began to crack.

“Not all of them,” said Fenna. “Only those from this basket. And those from the baskets that were nearby. And those that were still open last night.”

Silence.

Silence is rare in the bag department. She entered like someone who throws open the door and says, “I have bad news.”

Then sounds could be heard again, but different. No longer the choir. More like a whisper. Sewing machines slowed down. Scissors snipped more cautiously. Hands paused.

“Klirr is going to freak out,” someone said quietly.

“Clatter doesn’t flip,” someone else said. “Clatter takes notes.”

Fenna put the piece of fabric into her suitcase. She did it carefully, as if the dot might creep through the felt.

“I won’t get Klirr,” she said, more to herself than to the others. “I’m not allowed to say the word.”

“Which word?” Jaro asked immediately, because Jaro was curiosity personified.

Fenna looked at him. Jaro wasn’t stupid. Jaro was just... loud. And loud is sometimes dangerous at the North Pole.

“The word you don’t say out loud if you want people to stay quiet,” Fenna said.

Jaro nodded immediately, as if he understood perfectly. “Ah. Like ‘heat decay’.”

“Yes,” Fenna said dryly. “Like that.”

She turned around to look at the basket again. Her gaze slid over the pieces of fabric. Over the sewing machines. Over the hands. Over the small things that were meant to hold.

And then, at the very edge of the room, between two hanging sacks, she saw a shadow.

Just for a moment. An outline. A silent observer.

An elf who didn’t laugh.

Fenna blinked. The shadow was gone.

Perhaps it was just a crease in the fabric. Perhaps just a play of light.

Maybe not.

Fenna did what people do who don't want to panic: she started sorting things out.

It sounds unspectacular, but it's essentially a form of magic. Whoever sorts things says to chaos: "I see you. And now I'm going to make you small." Chaos usually laughs at this, but at least it becomes quiet enough that you can hear its footsteps.

In the bag department, however, sorting didn't mean "we're putting the strips by color." Sorting meant: rearranging baskets, counting cut pieces, checking rolls, briefly stopping sewing machines and looking as if it were all perfectly normal, please continue working, no, really, everything's running smoothly, almost everything, well... a lot of things.

The elf with the pincushion – her name was Mirna, as Fenna had now learned because someone had shouted, "Mirna, not again!" – pulled a second bag from the row and held it up. "That one's good," she said, as if trying to encourage herself.

Fenna picked it up, felt along the seams, and held it up to the light. It was indeed good. No spots. No absorption of light. A perfectly ordinary sack, whose sole purpose was to be a faithful servant of gravity.

"The basket," said Fenna.

Mirna nodded. "Just the basket."

"For now," said Fenna.

The word hung in the air for a moment, and several elves pretended not to have heard it, because "still" is the word you say when you think things could get worse, and nobody wants to think that when they're trying to finish three hundred sacks.

Jaro grabbed a pen and was now standing next to a board, making marks on it. "How many cutouts were in there?"

"Too many," said Fenna.

"That's not a number."

"It is a prediction."

Jaro grinned briefly because he liked seeing Fenna grin, even if it was just a dry grin. Then he became serious again and continued making marks. He was surprisingly useful if you gave him a task that kept him from asking questions.

Fenna knelt beside the basket, pulled out pieces of fabric, held them up to the light, and laid them in two piles: "clean" and "not clean." The "not clean" pile was small. For now. But it existed. And that was enough to turn the world upside down.

"Perhaps it's from the lamp," said an elf who was standing too close and sounded as if he liked to fold reality into handy explanations.

Fenna looked at the lamp. "If the lamp makes a mess, it makes it all over everything. Not just individual pieces. Besides—" She held up a piece of fabric. "—the dot is in the weave. Not on the surface."

"Maybe it's a knot."

"A knot doesn't swallow light," Fenna said. She could also have said: A knot doesn't feel like a problem that secretly rejoices. But she lacked the desire to sound mystical.

She pulled out the next piece. Neat. Next: neat. Next: spot on.

The period was tiny, but it was there like a punctuation mark that suddenly changes the meaning of an entire paragraph. Fenna felt her concentration tighten. She began to see patterns, against her will. Every period was a whisper. Every clean cut was a "Maybe you're exaggerating."

"Who cut the pieces?" she asked.

Mirna grimaced. "That comes from the cutting station. Everyone cuts there. High load, you know."

"All" was another one of those words. It meant: nobody exactly.

Fenna stood up. "I have to go to the cutting station."

"Now?" Mirna asked. "In the middle of a run?"

"Right now," Fenna said. "If I leave later, it will be too late, and then everyone will say, 'That's probably always been the way it is.'"

Jaro raised his hand as if he were in school. "Should I come along?"

Fenna looked at him. Jaro was a walking bell. If you wanted to be inconspicuous, you didn't take Jaro with you. But if you wanted people to act as if everything were normal, Jaro was perfect. Nobody suspected someone walking around with Jaro of doing anything secret. It was like trying to carry out a spy mission with a singing donkey.

"Yes," said Fenna. "You're coming with me. And you're going to talk. A lot. About anything. About snowflake chocolate or something."

Jaro beamed as if he had just been given a stage. "I can do this!"

They set off, Fenna with the suitcase, Jaro with the board covered in tally marks, which he carried as proudly as if it were a diplomatic document. On their way through the factory hall, Jaro chattered away about chocolate shaped like snowflakes, about whether it needed to be stored in the refrigerator or if it would then taste "too wintry," and about the rumor that a reindeer had once eaten an entire bucket of cocoa powder and then hadn't stopped sneezing for two days.

Fenna was only half listening. The other half of her mind was counting footsteps, doors, and turns. She thought about the tube when it clinked. About the core. About the dark spot in the fabric.

And she thought of the shadow between the sacks.

The cutting station was a long room with large tables and cutting machines that looked as if they could easily halve wood if provoked enough. Bright, honest lamps hung above the tables. The floor was littered with fine fiber remnants, lying in the corners like tiny, white ghosts.

Elves stood at the tables, sliding lengths of fabric over markings, cutting along templates, stacking cut pieces into baskets. It was a dance, but not a beautiful one. More like the kind you do when the music is too fast and you don't want to embarrass yourself.

Fenna went directly to the table where the large pieces of sack fabric were lying.

"Who cut this batch?" she asked.

An elf with a pair of scissors so large they deserved a name of their own looked up. "Which batch?"

Fenna pointed to the baskets. "These ones. The big ones."

The elf shrugged. "Me. And Reki. And sometimes Sova too. And—"

"Good," said Fenna. "Then you've all seen the roll of cloth they came from."

"The roll is here," said the elf, pointing to a large roll of fabric lying on a rack.

Fenna stepped closer. She stroked the fabric, peeled back a piece, and held it up to the light. Clean. She continued. Still clean.

"Maybe it's not in character," Fenna murmured.

"Maybe it's all in your head," said the elf, not angrily, more tiredly. "We've been cutting here for hours. Fabric is fabric."

Jaro cleared his throat and immediately began to tell a story about how Stoff had once tried to wrap a reindeer, and the reindeer had gotten tangled in the roll, and how they had only managed to get it out with songs and carrots. The elf listened because it's hard not to listen to Jaro. Fenna used the moment to go behind the table.

There stood the baskets containing the cut fabric pieces. And there was something else there too: a small wastebasket containing fabric scraps and pieces of thread.

Fenna knelt down, carefully pulled out a few remnants, and saw the spot.

Not on a cut piece of fabric. On a folded piece of material that looked as if no one had deliberately put it there. Folded too neatly. Too deliberately.



Fenna picked it up, not by touching it directly, but with a wooden ruler that lay next to the table. The dot sat on it like an eye that doesn't blink.

She felt her heart beat faster. Not from fear. From the kind of cold clarity you get when a mystery suddenly takes on a face.

"That wasn't by chance," she said quietly.

"What?" asked Jaro, still in the middle of his reindeer fabric story.

Fenna unfolded the piece of fabric. Inside it was clean. Except for this one spot. Right where it could have come into contact with other fabrics when folded.

This wasn't dirt that you accidentally track somewhere.

That was well placed.

Fenna raised her gaze. She wasn't looking at the elves at the tables. She was looking at the paths one could take to get here. At the door. At the shadows between the shelves.

And then she saw him.

Not exactly. Not in a way that made him stand there like a perpetrator, holding up a sign. But rather as part of the movement. An elf walked past the entrance, paused for a moment as if looking at something, nodded to someone, and disappeared back into the throng.

Grey. Angular. Beard like wood splinters. Movements too calm for a heavy-duty shift.

Malrik Splitterbart.

Fenna remained motionless, as if she were merely thinking. In reality, she was holding her breath, because she suddenly understood: Malrik wasn't just somewhere in the light installation. Malrik was exactly where he needed to be, to touch everything everywhere, without anyone noticing.

She could have spoken to him right then. She could have pointed at him and shouted, "You!" That would have been dramatic. And stupid.

Instead, Fenna did what she did best: she gathered evidence.

She took the piece of fabric with the dot, placed it in an empty paper sample sleeve that lay next to the stencils, and with a trembling hand wrote a small mark on it. Not his name. Not the forbidden word. Just a mark she would recognize.

Then she looked up and noticed that Malrik was no longer visible.

Of course not.

Malrik was never where people wanted him to be. Malrik was always where they could only later suspect he was.

Fenna stood up. Her knees were cold, but her thoughts were hot.

“Jaro,” she said.

“Yes? And then the reindeer sneezed, and the whole—”

“Jaro,” Fenna said more sharply.

He fell silent immediately. That was impressive. Almost as impressive as a bell finally stopping to jingle.

“I need,” Fenna said slowly, “you to act as if everything is completely normal. And at the same time, to keep an eye out for anyone leaving who doesn’t work here.”

Jaro frowned. "That doesn't sound normal."

“Exactly,” said Fenna. “So pretend.”

Jaro nodded, seriously like someone who had just been appointed guardian of a secret bigger than himself.

Fenna reached for her suitcase, and as she did so, she noticed her fingers were trembling slightly. Not from fear. From the realization that the hole in the bag wasn't just a hole.

It was an invitation.

And someone was hoping she would fall through.

Fenna would have liked to go to Klirr right away. It was a comforting thought: a space where things could be named, categorized, and stamped so they would feel proper. But Klirr had rules, and rules in this place were like nails: they held many things together, but they could also be a real nuisance.

Furthermore, Klirr wasn't everywhere. Malrik, on the other hand, had the unfortunate advantage of being able to be everywhere without anyone calling him "everywhere".

Fenna didn't leave the cutting station hastily. Haste is the way of the guilty and the desperate. Fenna was neither. She walked at the pace of someone who has a plan and is just catching the world in the act of imposing a second one on her.

Jaro stayed behind and played guard. It was astonishing how seriously he took it. He stood near the door, folded his arms, and tried to look like a dangerous creature you wouldn't want to mess with. Since Jaro, in his normal state, possessed about the menace of a singing cookie tin, the result was... charming. But at the North Pole, charm is sometimes more effective than fear, because nobody expects it.

Fenna went back to the bag department.

The room felt different than before. Not because the machines had changed. They still whirled and rattled as if trying to outrun time. It was the atmosphere. Elves had the unpleasant

habit of spreading emotions like dust: if one got nervous, the others breathed it in, and suddenly the whole department was a little too quiet.

Mirna now held up three bags side by side, as if she were asking a jury for approval.

"This one is good," she said.

"That one too," said another eleven.

"And him?"

Mirna pressed her lips together. "This one... feels wrong."

Fenna stepped closer. "Show me."

Mirna handed her the sack. Fenna didn't let it fall to the ground. She held it up, shook it gently, and listened to the rustling. A sack always rustles. That was its right. But this one sounded as if, with each rustle, it was briefly considering whether it even wanted to continue playing.

Fenna felt along the seam. The fabric was slightly stiffer in one spot. Not visible. Only noticeable if you knew what to look for. And Fenna, unfortunately, knew very well by now.

"We are testing," she said.

"How?" asked Mirna.

Fenna looked around, reached for a box of test weights—small sandbags normally used to check if a sack has the right load-bearing capacity. The sandbags looked like they might be related to the sandbags people pile up before floods, only these would probably be offended if you called them "floods." They were for gifts. For important things.

Fenna put two bags in the sack. Then three. Then four. She pulled the sack shut, lifted it, and swung it gently.

Nothing happened.

Mirna exhaled. An elf nearby muttered something that sounded very much like "There you go."

Fenna swung the fabric again. A little more forcefully. The fabric held. The seam held. The sack behaved like a sack.

Fenna was about to say: good. Just to relax everyone's faces.

Then – very quietly – that noise came again.

Ratsch.

This time it wasn't a goodbye. It was a promise.

A small tear ran along the spot where Fenna had just felt it. Not large. Not dramatic. But large enough that a grain of sand could have squeezed through if it had been determined. Fenna saw the fabric fray at the edge, as if it had suddenly decided to be old.

"Damn," whispered Mirna.

Fenna carefully lowered the sack before it gave way completely. She pushed the tear apart with her fingers and saw inside the dark spot that had become lodged in the fabric like a stain, not made of dirt, but of defiance.

"Don't continue," said Fenna.

"How can I not continue?" Mirna's voice trembled. "The bags have to be finished! Without bags—"

"—everything flies individually," someone added, and suddenly it no longer sounded like a joke, but like a nightmare.

Fenna raised her hands. "We'll continue. But differently."

"Different" was another one of those words. It usually meant: slower. And slower was a term of abuse in the high-load shift.

"We are isolating all cuts from the affected baskets," said Fenna. "Everything that came from there is going into quarantine."

The word slipped out because it was the most accurate one she could think of.

Several elves flinched as if she had said "dragon".

"That sounds like... like..." one of them began.

"After trouble," Mirna finished.

"It's about caution," Fenna said. "And caution only sounds like trouble if you're used to ignoring it."

Mirna stared at the sack. Then she stared at Fenna. "And what are these? These dots?"

Fenna felt the forbidden word scratch against her tongue. She swallowed it. Words can make things big. And this thing was big enough.

"Something that shouldn't be here," said Fenna.

"Can we wash it out?"

"It's embedded in the tissue."

"Can we throw the fabric away?"

"And what do we take then? Snow?"

A soft, nervous laugh rippled through the department. It sounded as if the elves had just tested their own laughter to see if it still worked.

Fenna pushed the affected bag aside. "We need replacement material. And we have to find out how it got into the cutouts."

Mirna stared at the basket. "That's sabotage."

Fenna didn't answer immediately. The word "sabotage" was powerful. It had teeth. It demanded consequences.

But Fenna had seen enough by now to know that the consequences didn't always affect the right people.

"We need evidence," she said instead.

"Proof? We have a hole in the bag!"

"A hole in the bag is a problem. Evidence is a perpetrator."

Mirna rubbed her forehead. "Who would do such a thing? Why?"

Fenna thought of Malrik's silent gaze. Of the calmness of his movements. Of the way he could disappear among things like a thought that had just been there.

"Because someone wants it to look like an accident," Fenna said.

At that moment, a bundle of ribbons fell from a shelf. It wasn't particularly important, but it was loud enough to make everyone jump. An elf cursed. Someone laughed nervously. The room resumed its work, as if it had just tried to momentarily forget its fear.

Fenna took one of the affected cutouts, placed it in a sample sleeve, and wrote the same small mark on it as before. Then she took a clean cutout and marked it differently. Comparison. Control. Fenna thought in terms of controls because controls prevent the world from suddenly becoming creative.

She was just about to close the suitcase when she noticed something.

Not in the fabric. Not at the seam. Not at the point.

There was a clock hanging on the wall.

A large factory clock with clear numbers and two hands that ticked so confidently, as if they could personally intimidate time itself. Fenna had seen this clock many times before. It was as ubiquitous as a pendant lamp: you accepted it as long as it did what it was supposed to.

And now she didn't.

Fenna needed a moment to be sure she wasn't just confused. A heavy workload made her tired. Tiredness leads to mistakes. But Fenna had her own internal clock, one that had learned in the hangar that seconds count.

She glanced at her small wristwatch – a robust device she had calibrated herself because she fundamentally distrusted factory watches. The watch read: ten past.

The large clock said: five to.

Fenna blinked.

“Mirna,” she said slowly. “When do you change shifts?”

Mirna looked at the clock, confused. "In... five minutes."

“No,” said Fenna. “In ten.”

Mirna stared at the clock, then at Fenna, then back at the clock, as if she had just discovered that numbers can lie.

"The clock is wrong," she whispered.

“Yes,” said Fenna.

And something clicked in her mind that felt very unpleasant. A hole in the sack was bad. A hole in the sack meant lost gifts. A hole in the sack was concrete damage.

But a wrong watch?

A faulty watch wasn't a loss. A faulty watch was a lever.

When time slipped at the Lichterwerk factory, everything slipped: conveyor belts, handovers, tests, breaks, checks. And when everything slipped, there was room everywhere for small, inconspicuous hands that could touch things without anyone knowing when they had done so.

Fenna closed the suitcase.

"I have to go," she said.

"Where to?" asked Mirna.

Fenna looked at the clock, then out the corridor, as if she were tracing the paths in her mind.

“To the place where nobody looks,” Fenna said. “Because everyone thinks they know what time it is.”

She left, and behind her the large clock on the wall continued to tick so confidently, as if it were perfectly normal that she had just stolen a few minutes from the entire factory.

And somewhere in the light installation, in a niche that can only be seen if you know what you are looking for, Malrik Splitterbart tightened a tiny screw until a mechanism shifted by the slightest touch.

Not much. Just enough.

## The clock that keeps wrong

If there is one thing that considers itself untouchable at the North Pole, it is time.

Not because she was polite. But because she was needed here like breath. At Lichterwerk, time wasn't an abstract idea to be tossed around in philosophical discussions until everyone was tired. Time was a raw material. Time was measured, allocated, saved, stolen, wasted, and sometimes, when no one was looking, given a kick back in the right direction.

And yet, most of the elves trusted the large factory clock on the wall so blindly, as if it had personally signed a promise.

Fenna, on the other hand, trusted her as much as one trusts a cookie found on the ground. You can eat it. It might even be good. But you should at least sniff it first and ask yourself why it's there.

She walked along the main corridor leading away from the factory halls and noticed how the sounds behind her changed. Not quieter—the light show couldn't get any quieter, it could only switch to a different kind of noise—but different. Behind her remained the rustling of the sacks, the whirring of the sewing machines, the occasional whoop of joy when someone succeeded at something that shouldn't have been possible at all.

Before her began the zone of transitions. The places where things moved from one department to the next, sometimes losing their meaning in the process.

At a crossroads stood three elves, all looking at their watches at the same time and moving so synchronously that Fenna briefly thought someone had choreographed them.

"Time for a break!" someone shouted.

"Not yet!" shouted another.

"Yes, yes, the clock says—" began the first one.

"The clock says a lot when the day is long," said Fenna, without stopping.

The three looked at her as if she had just claimed that snow was warm.

Fenna clutched her suitcase tightly, as if it were trying to develop a life of its own. Inside were the sample envelopes with the marked fabric pieces, and she felt as if she were carrying a bag full of tiny, wicked secrets that could break free at any moment.

She wasn't quite sure where she was supposed to go. That was the unpleasant thing about things that weren't right: they didn't always point to the right door. But Fenna knew what she was looking for.

A clock doesn't just go wrong.

A clock runs wrong because it's broken, or because someone broke it, or because it's connected to something that's malfunctioning. Three possibilities. Fenna didn't like possibilities. She liked values.

She turned into a side corridor that led towards the technical alcoves. A place you wouldn't look, because you assumed it was just full of technology. As if technology weren't precisely the kind of thing that suddenly develops a personality when you ignore it.

The hallway smelled of metal and cold dust. The strings of lights here were sparser, more functional than decorative. Signs hung on the walls, neatly explaining what was forbidden. Fenna didn't read them. Not because she disliked rules. But because rules sometimes lull you into a false sense of security, and at the North Pole, security is the most convenient way to be surprised.

She stopped in front of a small door with a sign that read: ZEITWERK. Below it, slightly crooked: PLEASE DO NOT TURN IF YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE TURNING.

Fenna knocked.

No answer.

She knocked again. Still nothing.

She pressed the handle. The door gave way, as if it hadn't had the strength to resist anyway.

Inside it was warm, but not cozy. Warm like a room full of gears staring at each other. A system of wheels, belts, and small pendulums ran along the wall, swinging back and forth as if trying to keep the world in check. In the center stood a workbench, on which lay screws, small pieces of spring, and two cups.

The first cup smelled like tea.

The second cup smelled of tea that had long since ceased to be tea.

An elf sat on a stool, with a bent back and the expression of a being who had seen many clocks in his life that had decided not to participate today.

"Hello?" said Fenna.

The elf didn't move.

Fenna stepped closer. "Excuse me."

The elf raised his head. His eyes were red-rimmed, as if he had just tried to teach a pendulum about responsibility.

"What?" he growled.

"The large clock in the bag department is wrong," said Fenna.

"The big clock is always wrong," said the elf. "The only question is how wrong."



Fenna blinked. "Pardon?"

The elf snorted. "It's a watch. It's proud. Pride makes you inaccurate."

"She's going five minutes late," said Fenna.

The elf paused. Something in his face shifted. It wasn't shock, more like... a reluctant interest.

"Five?" he repeated, sounding as if Fenna had just said a number that you don't just throw around.

"Yes."

"And who noticed that?"

"I," said Fenna.

"Of course," muttered the eleven. "Always the ones who measure."

He stood up, his back cracking like an old hinge offended by being used. Then he went to a small blackboard on which hung a list: clock locations, calibration times, notes. Next to some locations was a small symbol. Fenna didn't recognize it, but it looked like a resigned stick figure head.

"Sack department..." muttered the eleven. "Calibrated three days ago. No report since."

"Now there's a report," said Fenna.

"Yes, thank you, I have ears," he growled, but without any real anger. He sounded more like anger was a luxury he couldn't afford. "Name?"

"Fenna Funkel."

The elf briefly examined her. "You're from the hangar, right?"

"Yes."

"Sled people," he said, as if it were a weather phenomenon in itself. "You always think everything has measurements."

"Everything has measured values," said Fenna.

The elf stared at her for a moment. Then he grinned briefly, so quickly that Fenna almost missed it. It was the grin of a man who had argued far too often with people who were right, but had no idea how impractical being right can be in everyday life.

"My name is Brann," he said. "And before you say anything: Yes, like Branntes. I had to live with it. So did you."

"Brann," Fenna repeated. "Can you check the watch?"

"I can," said Brann. "The question is: do I want to?"

"Do you want?"

Brann sighed. "No. But I'll do it anyway, because if I don't, someone will come along later and shout, and shouting messes up the pendulums."

He picked up a toolbox that looked roughly like Fenna's, only with more scratches and less hope, and went to the door.

Fenna followed him back into the hallway. Brann walked quickly. Not frantically, but with the pace of someone who knows that time is playing a bad joke on them and has decided to play along.

On their way, they encountered elves standing in groups, discussing why the break hadn't started yet, even though the clock indicated it had. One of them held up a cookie box like evidence.

"Brann!" someone shouted. "The clock's acting up!"

"The clock is always acting up," Brann called back. "Today it's just acting up in a more creative way."

Fenna noticed that Brann didn't look at anyone as he walked. Not because he was being rude. Rather, because he'd learned that looks prompt questions, and questions cost time, and time was precisely the enemy.

They reached the sack department. The room was still filled with that strange mixture of work and nervousness, like an orchestra about to play the wrong part. Mirna saw Fenna and immediately came over.

"The clock!" said Mirna. "It says we're late!"

"She is too," said Fenna. "Only the other way around."

Brann stepped beneath the clock, looked at it as if meeting an old acquaintance who owed him money, and pulled up a small ladder. He climbed up, opened a flap in the case, and peered into the clockwork mechanism.

"Hm," he said.

"What?" asked Mirna.

"Hm," Brann repeated.

That wasn't a good answer. "Hm" was the sound a mechanic makes when he sees something that shouldn't be there, but hasn't yet decided how angry he's allowed to be about it.

Fenna stepped closer and looked up as high as she could. She saw gears, springs, a small pendulum swinging tirelessly. Everything looked normal. Too normal. Fenna began to hate "too normal".

Brann pulled out a small lamp and shone it into the casing. The light glided over metal, over wood, over the fine edges of the gears.

Then he paused.

His hand remained still, as if it were suddenly afraid to touch anything.

Fenna saw what he saw.

Something was stuck to it at one point, where a small gear meshed with another. Tiny. Dark. Not grease. Not oil.

One point.

Not big enough to stop instantly. Not big enough to destroy. Big enough to slow down. Big enough to shift time by minutes and pretend it's a quirk of the mechanics.

Brann stared at it and swallowed. "Who was here last?"

"Here?" asked Mirna. "Nobody! That's... the clock. It's hanging there."

Brann laughed briefly, but it didn't sound cheerful. "Yes. And birds fly, but they still sometimes land on a head."

Fenna felt that cold heaviness return to her stomach. The dot in the fabric. The grain at the core. And now a dot in the clockwork.

It was no coincidence.

It was handwritten.

Brann took a pair of tweezers, reached for the spot – and paused, as if he suddenly had a thought he didn't like.

"What is it?" Fenna asked softly.

Brann looked down, his face tense. "If I remove this," he said, "the clock will be correct again. And everyone will say, 'There you go, problem solved.'"

"And?" asked Mirna.

Brann looked into the clockwork again. "And then the question remains: Who touched time?"

Fenna heard the sewing machines behind her grow louder again. As if they had decided that the question shouldn't be asked for too long.

She knew Brann was right. Removing a dot was easy. Finding the dot that had placed it was hard.

And somewhere in the light show, between the sounds, between the layers, between the minutes that had just been stolen, an elf sat at a table, carving a wheel and not laughing.

Brann still held the tweezers in the air, as if he had just realized that he was not actually fiddling with a clockwork mechanism, but with the spine of the light mechanism.

"If I pull this out now," he muttered, "it's gone. And when it's gone, everyone acts as if it was never there."

"But then the clock will be right again," Mirna said. Her voice had that thin tinge of panic that you get when you realize you're suddenly responsible for a problem that can't be solved with a needle and thread.

"Clocks are never accurate," Brann said. "They only agree."

Fenna looked at the dark speck in the clockwork. It was so small. A mere whisper. A nothing. And yet it had the power to shift the entire factory by minutes, as if time were a carpet that you simply pull aside so the edge is no longer in the way.

"Can you secure it?" Fenna asked quietly.

Brann glanced at her. It was a look that said: You are one of those who understand that "proof" doesn't mean shouting loudly, but remaining silent.

"Yes," he said. "If I can figure it out without him..." He searched for a word. "...freaking out."

"Out of... what?" Mirna asked.

Brann snorted. "Sometimes things get offended when you touch them."

He pulled a small glass tube from his pocket, one of those tubes that turn up everywhere at Lichterwerk whenever someone finds something that doesn't belong in a pocket. He slowly brought the tweezers up to the grain.

The grain didn't move. Of course not. Grains are very good at pretending they aren't problems. Problems are just grains with ambition.

Brann grasped it. Very gently, as if he were grasping a snowflake crystal that would instantly dissolve if you looked at it. He pulled.

The grain came loose. Not with resistance. With a small, almost silent yielding, which worried Fenna more than a jamming. A jamming would have been mechanical. This felt like... agreement.

Brann dropped it into the tube. It didn't click. It made more of a sound that couldn't be heard but could be felt: a tiny "Now I'm somewhere else."

Brann immediately closed the tube and put it away as if he had just caught an angry beetle.

"And now?" asked Mirna.

"Now," said Brann, "I'll set the clock correctly. And then I'll ask the question: How did something like that get in there?"

Fenna had the same question, but she asked it differently. She didn't ask it as "How" but as "Who". And in her mind, jagged as a splinter of wood, was a name.

Malrik Splitterbart.

Brann pulled out a screwdriver, turned a small adjusting screw, and the hands of the large clock twitched. First reluctantly, then as if ashamed that they were wrong at all. The clock jumped forward five minutes, as if it had just corrected an embarrassing mistake and hoped no one had noticed.

Of course everyone had noticed.

The elves stared up as if they had just been allowed to breathe at the same time.

"Oh!" someone exclaimed. "Now it's correct!"

"Of course it's correct," someone else exclaimed. "It's hanging there, after all!"

"Yes," Brann murmured, "and fish swim, so they have to be on time too."

Fenna turned and saw the atmosphere in the department change immediately. Not because the problem was gone, but because the most visible symptom was gone. People are remarkably good at letting symptoms calm them. It's a kind of talent.

Brann closed the clock cover, climbed down the ladder, and wiped his hands on a rag that had heard so many oil and dust stories that it would probably start telling them someday.

"I'll take that," Brann said to Fenna, tapping his bag.

"Please," said Fenna. "And... say clink?"

Brann grimaced. "Klirr wants numbers. I've now given her..." He tapped the bag. "...a grain. That's not a number."

"It is a cause."

"Causes are uncomfortable," said Brann. "That's why they are so rarely celebrated."

Before Fenna could answer, a low murmur rippled through the bag department. Not the murmur of gossip or surprise, but rather the murmur that arises when a room collectively senses that someone important is approaching, even before they can see them. Like how dogs know the mailman is coming, even though the mailman isn't there yet.

Fenna noticed it first in the air. It became... different. As if someone had thrown in a hint of mint. And something warm, not of cinnamon, but of fireplace, of leather, of the kind of winter that isn't afraid of the cold.

Then it suddenly became quiet enough that you could hear the distant clicking of the gears.

And then he appeared.

Santa Claus wasn't... he wasn't simply a man in red. That's the image left to people who believe color is a property of fabric and not of meaning.

He was tall, but not in the sense of "I take up a lot of space," but rather in the sense of "I am the benchmark by which other rooms measure their size." His coat was red, yes, but not the kind of red that screams. More the kind of red that says: I've seen many storms and I'm still here. His beard was white and full, but it didn't look soft. It looked as if it could even stop a spark if necessary.

And his eyes – Fenna noticed this immediately – were tired.

Not broken. Not sad. Just tired. The tiredness of someone who performs the same miracle year after year, knowing full well that a miracle doesn't get any easier just because you've done it many times before.

He stopped at the entrance to the department and looked around, as if he didn't see the bags, but what they represented: a promise that must hold together.

"Good morning," he said.

In the Christmas lights, there were many "Good mornings." From Jaro, it sounded like a fanfare. From Brann, it sounded like a complaint. From Mirna, it sounded like an apology. And from Santa Claus, it sounded like an agreement.

"Tomorrow," Mirna managed. Several elves murmured as well, as if they had just forgotten how to use words correctly when they sound official.

Brann stepped forward. Not subserviently, but respectfully. "Niklas."

Fenna blinked. Niklas. Of course he had a name. It was just strange to hear it because "Santa Claus" sounds like a title that's all you need to know.

"Brann," said Santa Claus. He nodded to Fenna. His gaze lingered for a moment on her suitcase, as if he had learned that suitcases at the North Pole are rarely just suitcases. "And you are..."

"Fenna Funkel," said Fenna, "because when Santa Claus asks, you don't say, 'Uh, me.'"

"Fenna," he repeated, and it was remarkable how much he sounded as if he actually remembered the name and didn't just categorize it as "the eleven who happens to be standing there." "I've been told there's unrest here."

Mirna made a small hand gesture towards the clock, as if to explain that restlessness was to be expected, because clocks are simply difficult.

Brann lifted the bag. "The watch was five minutes slow. The reason..." He hesitated, then instead of removing the tube, he merely tapped the bag again. "...was that."

Santa's gaze became a touch sharper. Not dramatically. More like someone had switched on another lightbulb in his head.

"Where from?" he asked.

"If I knew that, I would have to drink less coffee," said Brann.

Santa Claus smiled briefly, but the smile didn't last. It was just a reflex. A polite one. Fenna suddenly understood something important: even his humor had a purpose here. It was a tool to keep things from spiraling out of control.

"The clock is correct again," said Brann.

"The clock is correct again," repeated Santa Claus. "That's good."

He let his gaze wander over the department. Over the sacks, the baskets, the hands that were working a little faster again, now that the timing was "right" again.

Fenna sensed that this was the moment when one could remain silent—or had to speak. And Fenna wasn't good at remaining silent when it came to systems that were showing cracks.

"It's not just the watches," she said.

Santa Claus looked at her. "Tell me a story."

"In the cut pieces," Fenna said, hearing herself weighing her words, "we find... spots. Dark spots that absorb the light. Bags tear in places that are neatly sewn. It feels as if the material has been... fatigued."

Mirna gasped softly, because she hadn't expected Fenna to say that. Brann stared at Fenna, as if simultaneously annoyed and admiring her. Jaro—who had reappeared nearby, because Jaro always reappears—opened his eyes wide and pretended not to have heard, even though he obviously heard everything.

Santa Claus was silent for a moment. Then he nodded slowly.

"How many?" he asked.

"Not many yet," Fenna said. "But it is... targeted."

"Deliberately," Santa Claus repeated.

The word was difficult to pronounce. "Gezielt" meant intention. Intention meant perpetrator. Perpetrator meant that the light display wasn't just fighting against time and weather, but against someone inside.

Santa Claus exhaled, and his breath did indeed smell a little like mint. Fenna had no idea why, but it suited her. Mint was fresh and tangy. Like something that keeps you awake.

"Brann," he said. "Bring me the tube."

Brann pulled it out and handed it to him. Santa Claus didn't take it like a curious grandfather inspecting a new toy. He took it like someone who had seen too many things that start small.

He held it up to the light. The dot in the tube absorbed the light.

"That's not good," Santa Claus said quietly.

Fenna felt a strange comfort in this statement. Not because it was good that it wasn't good. But because someone who personified "Christmas" had said it. That made it real. And things that are real can be fought.

Santa Claus looked at Fenna again. "You're taking that to Klirr."

Fenna blinked. "I... Clink has—"

"I talk with clang," said Santa Claus. It wasn't an order. It was a sentence that brought a little order to the world.

He didn't put the tube away. He gave it back to Brann. "Secure everything. And nobody shouts it into the hall before we know what it is."

Fenna nodded because she knew what he meant, and because she suddenly understood that it wasn't just Klirr who didn't want to hear the word. Neither did Santa Claus. Not out of superstition. Out of caution.

He turned to leave. At the exit, he paused briefly and looked at his watch. Then he said, almost casually:

"Time is not a background here. Time is a layer. When someone touches it, they touch everything."

Then he left, and the department breathed again as if they had only borrowed him for a short time.

Fenna stopped, suitcase in hand, and felt something solidify inside her. Santa Claus was now part of the problem. That meant: It was big.

And somewhere in the light show, in a niche that no one noticed, Malrik Splitterbart put on his gloves as if he were looking forward to a long day.

Not because he was working.

But because he knew that he was being taken seriously.

Santa Claus had left, and with him, that peculiar hint of fireplace warmth had vanished from the sack section. What remained was what always remains when someone important appears and then disappears again: a room full of people pretending they weren't startled, and therefore becoming all the more frantic.

Mirna sewed as if she were personally punishing the fabric. Jaro talked twice as much as usual, an achievement that really deserved a small medal. Brann was already halfway out the door, his toolbox at his side, the vial with the dark spot in his pocket like a small, evil jewel.



Fenna followed him a little way down the corridor. Not because she liked Brann—although she did like him, in that gruff way you appreciate in people who have no patience for nonsense—but because she felt that no one should be alone right now. Not with thoughts so heavy.

"He is rarely in the departments," Fenna finally said.

Brann snorted. "He's rarely where he's seen. He's often where he's needed."

"And now he's needed?"

Brann paused briefly and looked at her. "When Niklas comes in person, it usually means either something is really important or someone has told him it's important. And that person is still alive, so I assume it's both."

Fenna nodded. "He told me to go to Klirr."

"Yes," said Brann, as if Fenna had announced that she wanted to voluntarily lie down in a crevasse. "Have fun."

"Klirr forbade me from saying a certain word."

Brann raised his eyebrows. "Did she?"

"Yes."

"Then she's probably right," said Brann. "Words are like screws. If you tighten the wrong one too much, something will crack."

Fenna held the suitcase tightly. "But we have to..."

Brann waved it off. "You don't have to say everything. You just have to show enough so that the right people draw the right conclusions. Klirr is good at drawing conclusions. That's her hobby."

They parted ways at an intersection. Brann disappeared towards the clockworks, presumably to check other clocks, because if there was a dot in one clockwork mechanism, there could be dots elsewhere. Dots were rarely only children.

Fenna headed towards quality control.

The passageway seemed even more orderly than before, as if the factory had decided to dress up especially for Klirr. Fenna didn't fit in. She smelled of fabric and oil, and of the feeling that something was lurking beneath the surface. She knocked on the door.

"In," came the reply.

Inside, Klirr sat at the table, and this time the table was covered in papers. Test reports. Measurement logs. A stack so high it cast its own shadow. Klirr looked up, and Fenna immediately realized that Klirr already knew something was up. Not because she was

clairvoyant. But because she was the kind of person who could sense a chill in the statistics even before it made a sound.

"Sparkle," said Klirr.

"Inspector," Fenna said.

Klirr pointed to a chair. "Sit down."

That was new. Klirr rarely stood people up unless she intended to explain something unpleasantly long to them.

Fenna didn't sit down. On principle. Out of nervousness. Out of the feeling that sitting at that moment would be like surrendering.

"Brann checked the watch," said Fenna.

Klirr blinked. "What time?"

"The one in the bag department. She was five minutes late. It was a..." Fenna paused. She felt the word again, like a matchstick on her tongue.

Klirr looked at her. Her gaze was calm, but it held a command: Go on.

"...a dark speck in the clockwork," said Fenna.

Klirr leaned back. "So Brann was there."

"And Santa Claus."

The clinking sound froze. Not visible, but Fenna saw it in the tiny stillness in her hand, which was about to reach for a pen. She didn't reach for it.

"Niklas was in the bag department?" Klirr asked.

"Yes," said Fenna. "He looked at the test tube."

Klirr exhaled. "Then it's serious."

"It's in the cuts too," Fenna said. She opened the case and laid the sample sleeves on the table. Clean marking. Problem marking. Comparison. Fenna felt a touch better as soon as things were on a table. A table turns fear into data.

Klirr took the casings, pulled out a sample, and held it up to the cold lamp. The dot absorbed the light.

Klirr said nothing. She said nothing for a long time. That was even more unsettling than a curse.

"How many?" she finally asked.

“Not many yet,” said Fenna. “But enough that bags are tearing even though they’re neatly sewn. And there’s a missing page in the logbook in the hangar.”

Klirr raised his head. "The page with the core values?"

Fenna nodded.

Klirr stood up, went to the shelf, and took out her own test tube – the one with the grain from the sled core. She placed it next to Fenna's fabric sample.

Two points. Two small abysses.

"It's the same pattern," said Klirr.

Fenna felt relief. Not because the pattern was good, but because it was a pattern. Patterns, at least, are tangible.

“Someone is doing this intentionally,” Fenna said.

Klirr nodded. "Yes."

“And someone is moving between departments,” Fenna said, and now came the moment when she wanted to say the name. The name that had been building up inside her like a splinter under her skin.

Klirr raised his hand. Not as a stop. More as a warning. "Before you name names: Have you seen him?"

Fenna swallowed. “Not... caught in the act. But... I saw someone. In the cutting station. And before that, in the factory hall. And...” She hesitated because this would sound silly, and silly is the worst thing you can be in quality control. “...someone went through my notes.”

Klirr looked at her for a long time. Then she nodded slowly, as if she were sorting things in her head that didn't fit into folders.

"You're sure it's not just... dirt?" she asked.

"Dirt doesn't absorb light," said Fenna.

Klirr grimaced. "You're right. And I hate it."

Fenna waited. Klirr thought. Klirr was now a machine of deductions, and Fenna could almost hear gears clicking into place in her mind.

Then Klirr said: "Niklas was here. Five minutes ago."

Fenna stared at her. "Excuse me?"

Klirr pointed towards the door. “He came straight to me from the bag department. He told me the watch had been tampered with. He told me to discreetly have it checked to see if other

watches were affected. He told me that you..." She paused briefly, which seemed far too long to Fenna. "...are attentive."

Fenna felt her face get hot. That was the strangest kind of praise, because it felt like a responsibility.

"And?" asked Fenna.

Klirr went back to the table, bent over the samples and said softly: "And he told me to allow you to say the word if you think it is necessary."

Fenna took a breath. The word was suddenly no longer a forbidden match. It was a tool. A dangerous one, but a permitted one.

"Resentment," said Fenna.

Klirr nodded, as if she had expected it and hoped she was wrong. "Yes."

Fenna felt a pang. Not in her finger. In her head. Grollruß wasn't just a problem with the material. Grollruß was the antithesis of everything the factory was built on.

"How do you do that?" asked Fenna.

Klirr opened a folder and pulled out an old document. It looked as if it had been copied so many times that in some places the writing was just a faint memory.

"You mix darkness into dust meant for light," said Klirr. "You need patience. And you need the desire to spoil things without being noticed immediately."

Fenna looked at the points. "So, someone who..."

"...who has been here a long time," said Klirr. "Someone who knows where the paths are. Someone who knows when no one is looking."

Fenna felt the name reappear. Malrik.

Klirr looked at her, and there was suddenly something in her gaze that Fenna had rarely seen in her: uncertainty. Not because Klirr didn't know what she was doing, but because she knew what she was doing – and that it still might not be enough.

"Sparkle," said Klirr. "From now on, you will no longer be going anywhere officially."

Fenna frowned. "What?"

"Officially," Klirr repeated. "You will go back to the hangar. You will take measurements. You will act as if everything is normal."

Fenna felt her shoulders tense. "And unofficially?"

Klirr slid a small inspection sticker towards her. A tiny metal seal with a fine crack that you only see if you know it's there.

“Unofficially,” Klirr said, “you’ll be looking. And if you see something that’s not right, you’ll mark it. Not with words. With this.”

Fenna took the mark. It was cold. Heavy. Precise.

"And what if I see someone?" Fenna asked.

Klirr didn't answer immediately. Then she said, "Then you observe him. You don't follow him. You don't confront him. You collect."

"Why?"

Klirr looked at Fenna, and this time her gaze was hard. "Because whoever is doing this isn't stupid. And because a stupid mistake like yours doesn't just cost you. It costs us time. And time is exactly what someone is stealing."

Fenna nodded. She wanted to disagree. She wanted to act. But she knew: Klirr was right. And sometimes the right path was the slowest.

She inserted the inspection sticker, closed the suitcase, and stood up. She paused at the door.

"Inspector," Fenna said softly.

"Yes?"

"Do you think we can do it?"

Klirr looked past Fenna as if she could already see the next flaws somewhere in the light show. Then she said: “We accomplish a lot. We also accomplish things we shouldn’t. But we mustn’t pretend it’s just a broken clock.”

Fenna nodded and went out.

The hallway was loud again, full of footsteps, voices, and work. Everywhere there was activity, as if speed could dispel the feeling that something was lurking in the shadows.

Fenna headed towards the hangar, the inspection sticker in his pocket, the samples in his suitcase, and the realization in his mind that the first person to summon Santa Claus himself rarely sticks to his initial small tricks.

And somewhere nearby, a soft, satisfied click could be heard – like a gear engaging exactly one tooth off.

## Fenna finds the first splinter

When Fenna walked back to the hangar, the route felt longer than usual. Not because the corridors had actually become longer (although the lighting system was certainly capable of such tricks), but because Fenna now saw everywhere what others didn't: small places where the world could go awry without anyone noticing.

A sign hung incorrectly. A conveyor belt running a fraction too fast. An elf who said "Everything's fine!" too hastily. Another who was too quiet.

Being too quiet was particularly unpleasant because it felt like an answer before the question had even been asked.

The hangar greeted her with its familiar breath: warm metal, cold wood, and that soft, deep rumble from the belly of the sled, as if some animal were sleeping inside, dreaming that the sky would finally need it again. Fenna liked that rumble. It was honest. It didn't pretend to be happy. It was simply there, saying: I'm working.

Tilo stood near the sled as always, holding the wrench with the same devotion with which other elves held pets.

"You're back," he said.

"I was never really gone," Fenna said, only realizing how true it was after she'd said it. Once you start paying attention to things, a part of you always remains in the room, even when your body has long since moved on.

Tilo leaned towards her. "You look like you've seen a crash."

"I saw a clang."

"That explains everything."

Fenna placed the suitcase on the workbench and pulled the inspection sticker from her pocket. She held it up to the light for a moment. The small metal seal looked inconspicuous. So inconspicuous, in fact, that it was almost insulting to think something like this could save the world.

"What is that?" asked Tilo.

"A permit," Fenna said.

"For what?"

"Something to look at."

Tilo made a noise that was somewhere between admiration and discomfort. "You're always looking."

"Not officially now," Fenna said. "But very unofficially."

Tilo nodded slowly, as if he had decided not to question this statement, because questioning at the North Pole sometimes leads to getting more answers than one would like.

Fenna opened the case and took out her measuring device. She placed it back on the core contact. The needle trembled, stabilized, and dipped slightly. Just like before. Just like yesterday. Just like... always, ever since someone decided that “always” should be a little different.

She was just noting down the value when her gaze fell upon the edge of the casing. There, where she had found the dark grain.

She had the location in her mind like a coordinate.

And yet, she now saw something new.

Not the grain. That was with Klirr, and that was a good thing, because grains around Fenna tended to feel important. No, the new thing was much more harmless.

A scratch.

A tiny, fresh scratch on the edge of the cover. So fine that it would disappear in the wrong light. So fine that no one would have noticed it if it hadn't been in exactly the same spot where no one had been yesterday.

Fenna bent closer and shone her small lamp over it.

The scratch wasn't accidental. It was... deliberate. As if someone had used a blade or a hook precisely there to loosen something. Or to loosen it without it looking like it had been loosened.

“Tilo,” Fenna said quietly.

"Hm?"

"Were you at the cover yesterday?"

Tilo immediately shook his head. "No. I'm not touching the cover. That's your..." He searched for the word. "...thing."

Fenna had this confirmed, not because she distrusted him, but because she needed facts like nails. They hold onto thoughts.

She slid the flap open again, this time not to measure the core, but to check the edges. Her finger glided along the edge, very carefully.

Then he got stuck.

A tiny puncture through the glove. Not enough to bleed, but enough to say: Here's something sharp that wasn't there yesterday.

Fenna pulled her hand back. Something was hanging from the glove.

A splinter.

Not big. A thin, light-colored splinter of wood, barely longer than a fingernail. It looked innocent. Splinters often do that. They are the professional victims in the play "I Only Wanted to Help."

Fenna took a pair of tweezers, grabbed the splinter, and held it up to the light.

It hadn't simply broken off. It had been cut. The edge was too clean to be accidental.

And at one end there was a tiny notch, so fine that it could have appeared as an accidental mistake.

But Fenna had learned today that "appears like" at the North Pole usually means "is intentional".

"This is new," she murmured.

Tilo leaned closer, without getting too close. "A splinter?"

"Yes."

"Splinters are normal. We work with wood here."

"Not like that," said Fenna.

She was about to put the splinter into a sample container when something occurred to her. Klirr had said: mark, don't talk. Words are loud. Marks are quiet.

Fenna took the test mark, held it against the splinter, and looked for a spot where she could apply the seal. She pressed it on gently.

A tiny imprint remained on the wood. Invisible to someone who didn't know what they were looking for. But it was there. A silent "I was here," not spoken by her, but by the system.

"What are you doing?" asked Tilo.

"I'll make him findable," Fenna said.

"You want to find the splinter again later?"

"I want to see where he turns up," said Fenna.

Tilo stared at her as if Fenna had just claimed that snowflakes could be used as spies. Then, because he was Tilo, he nodded seriously.

"That's... clever," he said.

"That's paranoid," said Fenna.

"The only smart person to be paranoid is one with bad press," Tilo said.



Fenna smiled briefly. Then she became serious again.

She placed the splinter in a sample container, sealed it, and wrote only a small mark on it. No name. No suspicion. Just: splinter.

It was their first tangible proof, not just "a dot". A splinter was more concrete. A splinter was something you could hold in your hand and say: This happened. Someone did this.

And then, because the day had apparently decided that Fenna deserved no rest today, she heard a noise.

Not the hum of the core. Not the rattle of the tools. But a quiet, almost polite clacking at the other end of the hangar.

Fenna looked up.

There was a walkway that ran over part of the hall. From up there you could see the sled, the workbenches, the shelves. A good place to observe without being observed.

And a figure was moving along this catwalk.

Not fast. Not hasty. Calm. So calm that it stood out during a busy shift, because busy shifts force everyone to act as if they're always three steps behind.

The figure paused briefly, as if checking something, then continued on. Fenna only saw the silhouette, but she knew that silhouette so well by now that her stomach clenched even before her mind could speak the name.

Splitterbart.

She didn't see him head-on. She couldn't swear it was him. She wouldn't have been able to prove it in court, if there were courts at the North Pole, which is a terrifying thought, because you'd have to imagine an elf swearing under oath that he really hadn't tickled the reindeer.

But Fenna knew it anyway.

She sensed it in the same way one senses that a room belongs to someone even before the person speaks.

She closed the suitcase. Not abruptly. Calmly. And as she did so, she briefly let the inspection tag slide from her hand into her pocket, where it was easily accessible.

"Tilo," she said softly.

"Hm?"

"If I ask you right now if you saw me," said Fenna, without taking her eyes off the catwalk, "you'll say no."

Tilo blinked. "Why should I—"

"Just say no."

Tilo swallowed. Then he nodded.

Fenna turned back to the sled, seemingly casually, and pretended to take measurements again. She made herself small. Inconspicuous. Another elf-like figure in the hangar, noting down the numbers.

And all the while she listened for footsteps.

Because if the elf on the catwalk really was Malrik, then there were only two possibilities: Either he was here by chance, which was unlikely, or he was here because he knew she was here.

And if he knew she was here, then he would eventually get closer.

Not to talk.

But to check if she had already seen too much.

Sometimes the hardest part of observing is not looking, but pretending you didn't see anything.

So Fenna pretended to measure. She did it quite convincingly, which was both reassuring and an uncomfortable realization: apparently, she could lie when she had to. Or at least she could disguise the truth so well that it disappeared into the sheer volume of work. In the light factory, that was practically a superpower.

She attached the probe, noted the readings, tapped the scale as if annoyed by a noise. Her breathing was perfectly rhythmic, not too fast, not too slow. No sign of alarm. Just the focused calm of an Elf engineer who prefers numbers to rumors.

She heard everything.

The soft clacking of boots on the catwalk. One step. Another. The catwalk responded with a short creak, like an old dog that isn't happy about a visitor but tolerates them. Then silence. A moment that lasted too long.

Fenna forced herself not to look up.

Tilo stood beside her, trying to act as if he wasn't about to panic because Fenna had asked him to later claim he hadn't seen her. Tilo was a good helper because he didn't understand things and still went along with it. That's rare.

"You're making that face," he whispered.

"Which face?" Fenna whispered back, without taking her eyes off her measuring device.

"It's like you're about to summon a gear spirit."

"I'm not swearing to anything," said Fenna. "I'm just observing."

"That's worse," Tilo muttered. "At least when you swear, you know where you stand."

Fenna suppressed a short laugh. It felt wrong to laugh while someone stood above, perhaps contemplating how to subtly throw her off. But sometimes laughter is just a reflex, a way of saying: I'm still me.

She shoved the measurements into the suitcase as if they were the most important thing in the world. In a way, they were, because they were an excuse. No one asks questions when you're obviously busy. At the North Pole, being busy is a kind of shield.

The footsteps on the catwalk started again. This time closer. Then Fenna heard something she didn't want to hear: the faint sound of a ladder being moved.

Someone climbed down.

Fenna felt her heart give a little jump, as if it had briefly forgotten it was a muscle and thought it was a rabbit. She kept her eyes on the suitcase, on the probe, on everything but the ladder.

"You should say no," Fenna murmured once more.

"I know," Tilo whispered, swallowing so loudly that Fenna briefly feared the sound might serve as a signal.

A shadow fell across the workbench. Not the broad shadow of the sled, but the narrow shadow of someone standing close enough to carry the scent of cold wood and even colder patience.

"Sparkle," said a voice.

Fenna slowly raised her gaze.

Malrik Splitterbart stood before her as if he had always been there and Fenna had simply ignored him long enough until he felt compelled to utter a syllable.

He looked like an elf carved from the wrong wood. Angular. Dry. His beard was like tiny splinters pointing in all directions, as if even his face had decided to treat no one with softness. His eyes were clear, alert, and they possessed that unsettling quality of revealing nothing yet registering everything.

"Malrik," said Fenna, and she hated how normal that sounded.

"You're spending a lot of time in the hangar today," said Malrik.

That wasn't a question. It was a statement that sounded as harmless as "It's snowing," but had the same undertone as "I know where you're moving."

"High-load shift," Fenna said. "There's a lot to measure."

Malrik nodded, as if mentally checking something off his list. "Measuring."

He let the word hang in his mouth, as if it were a taste he disliked. Then he looked at the suitcase. Fenna noticed his attention tracing the edges, as if he were considering, without asking, what might be inside.

"Your tool is very neat," said Malrik.

"Mine too," Tilo said immediately.

Malrik looked at Tilo. It was just a glance, but Tilo noticeably shrank. Like a screwdriver that suddenly realizes it's standing next to a wrench.

"Of course," said Malrik, turning back to Fenna. "Order is... rare."

Fenna sensed that there was a second meaning in this sentence, but she couldn't tell if it was a threat or just Malrik's way of taking on the world.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

That was the trick sometimes used when someone gets too close: you offer help so they have to take on a role. Roles are like drawers. People who are put into drawers are easier to observe.

Malrik didn't smile. Of course not. But the corners of his mouth moved slightly, as if he had briefly considered what it would be like to smile, and then decided it wasn't worth the effort.

"I'm not helping," said Malrik. "I'm working."

"This is a form of help," said Fenna.

"For some," said Malrik. "For others, it's an obstacle."

Fenna forced herself to remain calm. The conversation was like walking on thin ice, except that the ice didn't crack, but pretended to be quiet until it suddenly gave way.

She didn't pick up the sample container with the splinter. Not at all. It stayed in the suitcase. Under test reports. Under things that looked harmless. Because if Malrik really was who Fenna suspected, then his greatest talent wasn't destruction, but discovery. And Fenna didn't want to find out how good he was at that.

"I heard," Malrik said suddenly, "that there was unrest in the bag department."

Fenna felt a slight shock because the word "heard" here didn't mean: someone had told her. It meant: Malrik knew. Somehow. Quickly.

"There is always unrest," said Fenna.

"More today," said Malrik.

Fenna looked at him. "Why are you interested in that? You have a job."

Malrik tilted his head slightly. "Because restlessness..." He paused briefly, as if searching for the right word. "...costs."

"Time," said Fenna.

"Exactly," said Malrik, as if she had just thrown him a bone that he would gladly chew.

Fenna felt everything inside her tighten. Time was the theme. Sacks, clock, points, core. Everything was time. And Malrik talked about it as if it were his hobby.

"And when time is lost," Malrik continued, "then things become urgent. And when things become urgent, mistakes happen."

"That's correct," said Fenna, as neutrally as possible.

"Mistakes are... expensive," said Malrik.

The word "expensive" didn't sound like an abstract idea to him. It sounded like something personal.

Fenna glanced briefly over his hands. They were clean. Too clean. No splinters under his nails, no dark marks. Hands that had learned not to bear traces.

"You're new," said Malrik.

"I'm... not exactly new anymore," said Fenna.

"New enough," said Malrik, "to still believe that you notice everything."

Fenna smiled briefly. "And you're old enough to believe that you can hide everything?"

It was a risk to say that. But Fenna realized that Malrik reacted to risks like a person who used to feel things and now only reacts when something cuts him.

Malrik's eyes narrowed slightly. Then he said: "You don't have to hide everything. You just have to know what others want to see."

Fenna felt goosebumps under her clothes, even in this heat. She forced herself to breathe.

"Tilo," Malrik said suddenly, without taking his eyes off Fenna, "you were here at Funkel's a lot today."

Tilo swallowed. Fenna felt his whole body briefly searching for an answer that wouldn't burst into flames.

"No," said Tilo.

It was a firm, surprisingly convincing no. It sounded as if he'd practiced it. Fenna was proud of him, and at the same time, worried that she was proud. Things got strange when you started planning lies.

Malrik looked at Tilo. His eyes were calm, but Fenna couldn't tell if he believed Tilo or if he was just noting that Tilo was lying.

“Good,” Malrik finally said. “Because distraction is... dangerous.”

He let his gaze wander over the sled again. Over the core. Over the cover. Fenna felt his eyes brush past the very edge where she had found the shard.

She didn't know if he saw the scratch.

She didn't know if he could know that she had seen him.

But she knew that this was the moment when you either make a mistake or a decision.

Fenna made no mistakes.

She made a decision.

“Malrik,” she said calmly, “if you hear or see something that isn’t right... tell Klirr.”

Malrik looked at her. A long look. Then he said: "Klirr only sees what fits within her testing framework."

"And what doesn't fit?"

"What happens between two exams," said Malrik.

He nodded as if it were friendly advice and left.

Just like that. Without a threat. Without a conclusion. He disappeared into the hall, became part of the background again, and that was precisely what was so unsettling: how easily it happened.

Fenna stopped and only now realized that she had been clutching the inspection sticker in her pocket the whole time, as if she could pin down fate with it.

Tilo exhaled so deeply that it sounded as if he were catching up on enough air for two shifts.

"Was that... normal?" he whispered.

“No,” said Fenna.

"Good," said Tilo. "Then I'm not crazy."

Fenna swallowed. "Not yet."

She opened the case a crack, just enough to see the sample container with the splinter. She didn't touch it. She just needed confirmation that it was still there. That her first splinter hadn't already turned to dust.

Then she closed the suitcase again.

“We need to find out where the splinter came from,” Fenna said.

“Made of wood,” said Tilo.

“Not like that,” said Fenna. “This splinter was made. And whoever makes splinters does other things too.”

Tilo nodded as if he understood, even though he probably didn't. But sometimes it's enough for someone to nod along with you so you're not facing a problem alone, a problem that can lurk around every corner.

Fenna took the suitcase and set off, this time not to Klirr and not to the sack department.

She went to where splinters are born: to the lumberyard.

Because somewhere someone must have cut, carved, and marked wood. And Fenna didn't want to just follow along anymore.

She wanted to get to the origin.

The lumberyard was the place where trees began their second career.

It should be said: at the North Pole, trees don't have an easy relationship with their careers. There are trees that simply stand there and do tree things, which is strenuous enough when you're constantly battered by the wind and being nibbled on by reindeer. And then there are the trees that are chosen. The ones that go to the workshop. The ones that eventually end up as a toy train, a rocking horse, or a tiny wooden dinosaur that gives a child the feeling that the world can sometimes actually be nice.

The wood station smelled of resin, sawdust, and that slightly electric hint of magic you get when a place produces "good" so often that the good eventually creeps into the walls.

Fenna liked the wooden station. Not out of sentimentality. But because everything was more visible there. Wood shows traces. Wood reveals itself when you cut it. Wood isn't so easily persuaded to be something it's not.

At least not without some grumbling.

She stepped inside, and immediately a barrage of sounds assaulted her: saws whirring, planes scraping, hammers pounding. It was louder than the sack-making department, but somehow more honest. If something went wrong in the lumberyard, you could see it. A board was crooked. A splinter popped out. An elf cursed. You knew where you stood.

This made it paradoxical: if someone was working here secretly, they had to be very good. Or have been here for a very long time.

Fenna walked past the worktables, nodded to a few elves, and was greeted with short, tired nods. Peak shift. No time for long conversations. No time for questions like "How are you?" – because the answer would usually be: "I'm a mixture of sawdust and hope."

She stopped at a table on which lay small wheels. Very small wheels. Perfectly round. Almost perfectly.

Fenna picked one up and looked at it.

It was beautifully done. Too beautifully. That was the problem: Malrik didn't work sloppily. Malrik worked precisely. Precision is a disguise because it inspires trust. Someone who is precise is rarely suspected of wanting chaos.

She put the bike back and continued on to a shelf where wooden strips were stored. Each strip was marked: origin, density, grain. The lumber station was meticulous because otherwise wood would take its revenge by cracking.

Fenna pulled out a strip of wood and ran her fingers along the edge. She wasn't looking for obvious cracks. She was looking for cut marks that didn't match what had been done here.

Next to her stood an elf with a face covered in sawdust. He looked as if he were about to turn into a plank himself.

"Can I help?" he asked, politely, but with the look you give people who are fiddling with their own things.

"I'm looking for fresh cut marks on strips that haven't been processed," Fenna said.

The elf blinked. "Why?"

Fenna thought for a moment. Klirr had said: don't talk, mark. But she couldn't remain completely silent, otherwise people would think she was crazy, and crazy people at the North Pole are either ignored or relegated to the decorating department, where they make fir-tree-shaped things until they give up.

"Because I found a splinter that doesn't look random," Fenna said.

The elf raised his eyebrows. "Splinters are always random."

"Not this one."

He studied her. Then, perhaps because Fenna didn't seem like someone who was looking for shards out of boredom, he nodded. "Okay. Let me see."

Fenna pulled the sample case from the suitcase, opened it a crack, and showed the shard without taking it out. The elf leaned forward.

"He's cut," he said after a moment.

Fenna nodded. "Exactly."

"Who makes a splinter like that?" he asked.

"Someone who wants to get stuck somewhere," Fenna said.



The eleven snorted. "So, someone who wants to cause trouble."

Fenna said nothing because saying yes would have been too easy. Besides, "causing trouble" was still too mild a word for what was happening.

"My name is Kallek," said the elf, as if he had decided that one should properly introduce oneself in such situations. "If you're wondering where something like this comes from: we have two kinds of cuts here. Straight and clean – for parts. And slanted and rough – when someone needs to quickly cut something off."

"And this one?" Fenna pointed at the splinter.

Kallek nodded slowly. "Odd, but controlled. Someone made it without it being visible. That's..." He searched for a word. "...masterful."

The word had an unpleasant tinge. "Expertly" meant: not a fool. Not an accident. Not a beginner.

"Who can do that?" asked Fenna.

Kallek shrugged. "Many. But why would anyone...?"

"Because wood is everywhere," Fenna said. "And a splinter can go anywhere."

Kallek looked at her. Then, very slowly, his eyes wandered to another table at the edge of the station. There sat an elf who didn't say much. He was carving. Quickly, calmly, precisely. His beard was gray and angular. His movements seemed to say with every flick of his wrist: I have time.

Fenna felt her stomach get cold.

Malrik.

Kallek said nothing. But his look said: You're not the first person to look at him like that.

"Does he work here often?" Fenna asked quietly.

"He works everywhere," Kallek murmured. "He's..." He hesitated. "He's one of those people you can't quite categorize."

Fenna nodded. "And who will sort him?"

Kallek laughed dryly. "Nobody. He sorts himself out."

Fenna slid the sample case back into the suitcase. She didn't want to go straight to Malrik. Not here. Not now. He was in his element in the lumberyard. Here he wasn't just an elf. Here he was part of the sounds. Part of the sawdust. Part of the routine.

Instead, Fenna did what Klirr had instructed her to do: she marked.

She took the inspection sticker from her pocket and walked slowly along the shelves. At every spot where she saw something even slightly suspicious – a fresh nick, a strip with an edge that was too smooth, a workpiece that seemed too perfect – she discreetly pressed the sticker onto it.

Not visible. Not for curious eyes. But there. A network of silent signs that would later say: Here. Here too. And here.

She didn't know if it would work. But a net is better than a single thread.

As she did so, she suddenly heard a voice behind her. Calm. Too quiet.

"You like markings."

Fenna turned around.

Malrik stood there, less than two steps away, as if he had grown out of the wood itself. He held a small wheel in his hand and examined it as if it were the most important thing in the world. His eyes were fixed on Fenna, but his face betrayed nothing.

Fenna felt her heart skip a beat. Not from fear. From anger. Because he had moved in such a way again that she hadn't heard him coming.

"I like order," said Fenna.

"Order is a marker," said Malrik. "It tells the world where it is supposed to be."

Fenna exhaled slowly. "And what if the world isn't there?"

Malrik lifted the wheel. "Then it rubs."

"Or someone is deliberately grinding it down," Fenna said.

Malrik looked at her, long, calmly. Then he said: "Those who search too much will eventually find things they would rather not have found."

"And those who don't look for them will find them anyway," said Fenna.

A tiny moment when something flickered in Malrik's eyes. Not terror. More like... recognition. Or the cautious joy of a player who notices that his opponent isn't about to collapse.

"You are persistent," said Malrik.

"I'm being careful," said Fenna.

"Caution is often just fear in a nice package."

Fenna felt herself grip the test sticker tighter in her pocket. "And what about you?"

Malrik blinked slowly once. "For me, it's experience."

"Experience of what?"

Malrik moved closer, just a breath. Not threateningly. More like Fenna could have smelled his breath if she wanted to. He smelled of wood. And nothing else. That was unnatural. Every elf smelled of something—tea, cinnamon, oil, work. Malrik smelled like an empty shelf.

"That," he said quietly, "things will always continue here, no matter who suffers."

Fenna felt the urge to say something that would unsettle him. But Klirr was right: confrontation only helps if you've already won.

Fenna simply nodded. "Then let's make sure they continue walking properly."

Malrik didn't smile. But his eyes narrowed slightly, as if he were making a decision.

"Be careful with your fingers, Sparkle," he said.

"How come?"

"Splinters are everywhere," said Malrik, and left.

Fenna stopped, the sounds of the wooden station again around her, and realized how cold she was despite the warmth.

She had found the first splinter. And Malrik knew it.

Not because he had seen the splinter. But because he knew how Fenna worked.

And anyone who knows how you work can set traps that snap shut exactly where you feel safest.

Fenna closed the suitcase and headed back towards the hangar.

She had to inform Klirr. Not with words, but with markings and patterns. And at some point, she had to explain to Santa Claus that the enemy wasn't out in the blizzard.

He was inside, at the work table.

And he didn't laugh.

## Sled test

The sled hangar has a special kind of silence, not because no one speaks, but because everyone knows when it's best to keep quiet. It's the silence that settles over tools when you not only use them, but also trust them to betray you. It's the silence that arises when a single wrong sound suddenly means more than an entire sentence.

Fenna stood at the edge of the large runners and watched as the inspection team gathered. That alone was unusual. Normally, the inspection was a matter between her, Tilo, two other hangar workers, and the sled, which behaved like an old, proud horse: it endured everything as long as no one pretended to be "just quickly" checking it.

But today more people came.

Today, elves arrived with clipboards that looked so fresh, as if they'd just been pulled from a dream. Elves with measuring tapes that gleamed in that unsettling way that says: I'm not here to help, I'm here to decide. Elves with flashlights so bright you wondered if they could illuminate secrets.

And then, like the cherry on top of a cake that's already too heavy, Inspector Klirr arrived.

It wasn't loud. The clatter didn't enter a room like a storm. It entered like a ruler placed on a table. Suddenly everything is straight, whether it wants to be or not.

Fenna put her suitcase down, didn't open it. Not now. Today wasn't the day for suitcase mysteries. Today was the day the mystery stood in the middle of the hall and pretended to be a serial number.

"Sparkle," said Klirr when she arrived at Fenna's.

"Inspector," Fenna said.

Klirr nodded briefly. Then her gaze slid over the sled, over the runners, over the core's cover, over the catwalks, as if she were already mentally ticking off the places where the world likes to lie.

"I don't want any surprises," said Klirr.

"Then you're in the wrong building," Tilo murmured, too quietly for anyone to officially hear, but loud enough that the light installation itself probably chuckled briefly.

Klirr ignored him, like one ignores a bell: you know it's ringing, but you don't give it any meaning.

"We're doing the full inspection," she said. "Skids. Hull. Straps. Load bearing. And then the core."

A slight shudder ran through the hangar crew. "And then Kern" was the sentence that landed like a cold spoon in warm tea. It sounded simple, but everyone knew that Kern had been a difficult subject this season.

Fenna felt the inspection sticker in her pocket like a small stone. A reassuring stone. A stone that said: You're not just nervous. You're prepared.

"Who created the test plan?" Fenna asked.

Klirr looked at her. "Me."

“Of course,” said Fenna.

Klirr blinked once. With her, that was almost a joke.

The first part went normally. The runners were scanned as if examining the legs of a large animal. Measuring strips slid along the rune lines. A lamp moved across the surface, making every tiny irregularity visible.

“Here,” said an inspector, tapping on a spot that looked like a barely visible scratch.

Fenna stepped closer, looked, and recognized the scratch. Not because she had expected it, but because she had only just registered it in her memory yesterday, like a splinter in her finger: you can ignore it, but you know it's there.

"That's superficial," she said.

"Superficiality is enough," said Klirr.

“Superficial is not structural,” said Fenna.

"Superficiality is often the beginning," said Klirr.

Fenna wanted to object, but then she realized: Klirr wasn't thinking in terms of repairs. Klirr was thinking in patterns. And patterns were exactly what Fenna saw, whether she wanted to or not.

One inspector knelt down and examined the metal strips on the fuselage. Another pulled on a strap, so hard that one almost felt sorry for the strap. The strap held firm, sulking but steadfast.

"Everything's clean," Tilo murmured, more to himself than to Fenna.

“For now,” said Fenna.

Tilo grimaced. "You like saying that word, don't you?"

“I say it because it's true,” said Fenna.

She heard footsteps on the catwalk, several this time. Examiners were moving up there, and Fenna felt that reflex to look up. Not because she was curious. But because she had learned that things often happen up high that no one down below notices.

She saw no one who shouldn't have been there.

That worried her even more.

“Core,” Klirr finally said, and the hall seemed to hold its breath for a moment.

The cover was opened. Heat rose. The golden pulsation was there, calm and almost friendly. Almost friendly is the most dangerous kind of friendly.

Klirr stepped closer, bent over the casing, and Fenna realized that for a moment Klirr was not an inspector, but simply an elf who knew that this core was the heart of a miracle.

"Measurement," said Klirr.

Fenna handed over her measuring device, and Klirr took it as if it were a scalpel. She positioned it, waited, and watched the needle.

The needle dropped slightly.

Klirr didn't move. Only her eyes narrowed.

"Once more," she said.

Fenna then attempted a second test. Again, the needle dropped slightly.

An inspector standing next to them cleared his throat. "That's still within the acceptable range."

Klirr looked at him. Not angrily. Not loudly. Just in a way that probably made the examiner inwardly begin to regret his life so far, which had been lived in tabular form.

"Within reason," Klirr repeated. "The framework is not the problem. The trend is the problem."

Fenna felt an uneasy satisfaction. She had seen it. She had named it. She hadn't been crazy. And yet, she wished she had.

"Contamination?" asked an inspector.

Fenna looked at Klirr. Klirr looked at Fenna. A look that said: We won't say that word. Not here.

"We are examining the surface," Klirr said instead.

She put on gloves so thin they looked like a concession, not protection. She ran her hand along the edge of the casing, right where Fenna had found the splinter yesterday.

Klirr paused.

Fenna felt her heart pounding in her ears. Not loudly. Just... present.

Klirr continued running his finger along the surface, then pulled his hand back and held it up to the light. A tiny wood splinter clung to his fingertips.

A splinter.

Not the same one Fenna had secured. But of the same kind: too clean, too deliberate. A splinter that doesn't just happen when wood moves. A splinter that happens when someone makes wood move.

"Where does that come from?" asked an examiner, and his voice suddenly sounded thinner.

Klirr didn't answer immediately. She turned the splinter between her fingers, and Fenna saw Klirr notice the tiny notch.

Then Klirr said, quietly and dangerously calmly: "Someone was tampering with the casing."

"Who?" the examiner asked, and in that word you could hear the hope that there was a simple answer. A name that could be written down. A problem that could be dismissed.

Klirr looked around the room. "Who has access?"

Several hands went up. Hangar crew. Inspectors. A mechanic from the catwalk group.

And then, at the edge, one hand did not rise.

Fenna didn't see him immediately. Not because he was invisible, but because he was positioned so perfectly at the edge that the eye wanted to categorize him as "not important".

Malrik Splitterbart.

He stood there as if he'd just happened to be passing by, as if he'd only checked to see if everything was alright. He wasn't smiling. Of course not. But there was something in his gaze that Fenna now recognized like a scent: interest. Alertness. And that quiet delight that the world was just saying the word "Who?"

Fenna said nothing. Klirr said nothing. The room remained still for a breath, as if the light installation itself were listening.

Then something happened that broke the silence.

Not a bang. Not an alarm. Something much worse.

A bell tinkled.

A single, small tinkling sound that came from somewhere where no bell should have been hanging.

All heads turned. A reflex. A pretty, harmless reflex.

Fenna did not turn around.

She kept her eyes on Malrik.

And Malrik... was no longer where he had just been standing.

He was one step ahead. Just one step. But it was the step that says: I'll move forward if you let yourselves be distracted.

Fenna felt her grip on the suitcase tighten. In her mind, things arranged themselves into a clear, cold order:

Spots in the fabric. A spot in the clockwork. A grain on the core. A splinter on the case. And now a bell that rings at the wrong time.

This was not a series of accidents.

That was a rhythm.

And someone played him.

The problem with bells isn't that they jingle. The problem is that they sound so harmless that people believe them.

A bell sounds like Christmas. Like snow. Like hot cocoa that's too hot and burns your tongue, but you drink it anyway because, at the North Pole, pain is sometimes the only proof you're still alive. A bell doesn't sound like sabotage.

That's exactly why it was perfect.

"Where did that come from?" shouted one of the examiners, and his voice suddenly had that slightly hysterical undertone you get when you realize that something small could mean something much bigger.

Several elves looked searchingly up, down, and behind the boxes, as if a bell might be ashamed and therefore hide. Tilo spun around in circles like a dog trying to catch its own tail, except that Tilo looked as if he were internally writing a report about his loss of control.

Fenna remained silent. Not because she was particularly brave, but because she understood: all the eyes now chasing after the bell were no longer looking at what was essential.

And the essential point was: Malrik had moved.

Not far. Just a few steps. But he had done it at the exact moment attention shifted. Like someone who knows very precisely how a room breathes.

Klirr noticed it too.

She said nothing. Klirr wasn't the type to shout in a public space, "There! That one!" Klirr was the type to take a piece of information and carry it inside him until it was hard enough to cut something with.

She was still standing at the core, the splinter between her fingers, and her gaze wasn't following the bell. It wandered around the room, calmly, systematically.

Like a headlight without light.

Fenna took a step closer to Klirr, just enough so that it looked like normal teamwork.

"He was here," Fenna whispered, without saying the name.

Klirr didn't answer. But her jaw tensed slightly. That was a whole other story with Klirr.



An inspector came back to them. "Inspector, the values are still within the limits, but—"

"Within reason," said Klirr. "Yes."

"And the splinter..."

Klirr held up the splinter. In the light, it looked as innocent as wood can be. Wood is only ever as innocent as you let it be.

"This is not a production snippet," said Klirr.

"How can you know that?" asked the examiner.

Klirr looked at him. "Because I've been seeing splinters for twenty winters. And because this one doesn't break. It ends."

The examiner frowned. Fenna understood exactly what Klirr meant: the splinter wasn't the random end of a fiber. It was a deliberate end. A point.

"What do we do?" asked the examiner, and one could hear in the sentence that he actually wanted to say: What are you doing to make things normal again?

Klirr said: "We will not end the examination."

"We... won't end it?" repeated the examiner, as if Klirr had just suggested burying the sled in the snow and placing hope in it.

"We are expanding them," said Klirr.

Fenna felt a brief surge of relief, followed immediately by worry. An extended test meant: more hands on the sled. More movement. More possibilities. And if there was someone in the room who liked to touch things, then "more" was a gift to them.

Klirr knew that. Of course she knew that.

"Core crew only," Klirr said loudly so everyone could hear. "Only those with core access remain here at the front. Everyone else goes back to their stations. Now."

It wasn't a scream. It was a sentence so precise it was like a knife. The examiners hesitated, but Klirr doesn't hesitate. And those who don't hesitate often win.

Some elves grumbled, some nodded, some pretended to suddenly have incredibly urgent tasks elsewhere. The room emptied slightly. Sounds returned. Normality crept back into the corners, like an animal cautiously testing its safety.

Fenna used the movement to search for Malrik.

He was no longer on the margins. Of course not. Malrik was like a splinter: he was never where you expected him to be.

Tilo approached Fenna, nervously. "I found the bell."

"Where?" asked Fenna.

Tilo held up a small bell hanging from a thin thread. The thread was clearly not part of any system. It looked as if someone had attached it somewhere haphazardly.

"It was hanging on the catwalk railing," said Tilo. "Way back there. So that it would jingle if someone bumped into it."

Fenna stared at the little bell. It was pretty. Brass-colored. A perfectly ordinary, harmless thing. And that was precisely what made it so repulsive.

"Who hung it up?" asked Fenna.

Tilo shook his head. "No idea. It was just there."

Klirr approached, did not take the bell, but only looked at it, as if her gaze could seize it.

"Secure it," she said. "And the tape too."

"Is that proof?" Tilo asked.

"It's a signal," said Klirr.

"What for?" asked Fenna.

Klirr looked at her. "For distraction. For control. For the knowledge that we will react."

Fenna nodded. She knew what Klirr meant. Someone wanted to see if the artwork twitched. And the artwork had twitched. The whole room had spun. And Malrik had moved at that moment.

"Core access list," Klirr said suddenly.

An elf from the core crew, an older mechanic named Rasko, took a list from a folder. Klirr picked it up, glanced over it, tapped his finger on two names, then on a third.

Fenna didn't recognize all the names. But she recognized her own. She recognized Tilo. And she noticed, in the margin, a note: Special access – across all workshops.

Next to this note was a name that sounded like a piece of wood thrown on the ground: Malrik Splitterbart.

Fenna felt her throat tighten.

Klirr said quietly: "Who approved this?"

Rasko shrugged. "That's old. He's had it for a long time. He's..." He searched for a word. "...useful."

"Useful," Klirr repeated, and the word took on a new meaning in her mouth. It suddenly sounded like: dangerous.

Fenna looked at the list, then back into the hall.

"He can go anywhere," she whispered.

"Yes," said Klirr. "And he knows that."

Fenna felt an impulse rising within her: to find him, confront him, pin him down like a mistake in a report. But that was wishful thinking. Malrik wasn't a mistake. Malrik was someone who distributed mistakes.

Klirr folded the list and put it in her pocket as if she were putting away a knife.

"The trial continues," she said loudly. "But from now on, it will be under observation."

"How?" asked Tilo.

Klirr looked at Fenna. Then she said: "Sparkle marked. Rasko recorded. Tilo..."

Tilo straightened up as if he were about to be named a hero.

"Tilo," said Klirr, "you keep your eyes open and pretend you can't see anything."

Tilo blinked. "I can do that."

"I believe that," Klirr said dryly.

Fenna felt a brief spark of humor, like a flickering flame before being extinguished by the snow. Humor helped. Humor was a small, warm place in the mind when all you had to deal with were cold numbers.

She placed the probe against the core again. This time she took her time. She didn't just scan the readings, but also the edges, the screws, the latches. She looked for further traces. For further scratches. For things that didn't fit.

And then – there it was again.

Not a grain, not a dot.

A second splinter.

It sat in a tiny crevice at the edge of the cover, as if it had been waiting there for Fenna. It was positioned so that it would be pushed inwards when the cover closed. Not hard enough to cause immediate damage. Hard enough to chafe on the next flight. Hard enough to eventually turn something warm cold.

Fenna took out the tweezers, removed the splinter, and this time, without hesitation, pressed the test mark onto it.

A print.

A silent sign.

And while she was doing that, far back in the hall she heard again that faint clacking of footsteps on metal.

Not many.

Only one person.

Fenna looked up, and she saw him. Not head-on. Not clearly. But she saw a figure stop at the hangar exit, glance back briefly—as if checking if Fenna was looking—and then disappear.

Malrik.

Fenna held the second splinter in her tweezers and suddenly understood "understanding" in its unpleasant, clear way:

He laid breadcrumbs down for her.

Not because he was stupid.

But because he wanted her to follow him.

When someone leaves breadcrumbs in front of you, the most important question is not whether you are hungry.

The most important question is: Where does the path lead?

Fenna stared for a moment at the splinter in the tweezers, as if she could read it, like a ranger from a footprint. The splinter was small, but it was like a signature: cleanly cut, too precise, too... deliberate. And it was exactly where it would cause trouble later. Not today. Not this minute. But when everyone is tired and no one can remember exactly who touched what and when.

Perfect.

She placed the splinter in a sample case and slid it into the suitcase. Then she closed the suitcase as if promising it: You'll stay closed.

Tilo stood next to her and looked as if he would like to do everything at once: flee, ask questions, help, and lie down under a workbench.

"He's gone," Tilo whispered.

"Yes," said Fenna.

"Does that mean you... you're following him?"

Fenna felt everything within her resist it. It was instinctive. Like a body that knows you're walking into a cold zone where you shouldn't stay long.

And yet there was also this other part of her that said: If you don't pursue him now, you'll lose him. If you pursue him, that's exactly what he wants.

That was the kind of decision that has no good options. Only different kinds of bad ones.

Klirr approached them. She had the look of someone explaining ten things at once without saying a single word.

"He wants you to leave," Klirr said quietly.

Fenna nodded. "Yes."

"So you're not going."

Fenna opened her mouth—and closed it again. Klirr was right. Of course Klirr was right. And Fenna hated it when someone was right and you still wanted to do something different.

"We are losing him," said Fenna.

"We won't lose him," Klirr said. "We'll let him believe he's leading us."

Fenna looked at her. "How?"

Klirr pointed to the test mark in Fenna's pocket. "You've marked him. Not directly, but you've marked patterns. You've left traces. You've left things that only he does. He's like someone who scatters litter everywhere and thinks nobody will notice. We do."

Fenna felt a touch of relief. Klirr spoke to Fenna's soul: not chasing after them, but closing the net.

"But what if he does something during that time?" Fenna asked.

Klirr looked at the sled core. "He'll do it anyway. It doesn't matter if you're chasing after him. Our job isn't to beat him in the race. Our job is to take the ground off him."

"That sounds... elegant," Tilo murmured.

"It's not elegant," said Klirr. "It's necessary."

Rasko, the mechanic taking notes, approached and held up a clipboard. "Inspector, all values recorded. Trend downward, but still within acceptable limits. No further visible particles. Two splinters secured."

"Good," said Klirr.

"Good?" asked Tilo, as if he had just been told that only two flies had been found in his soup.

Klirr looked at him. "Good means: we have something in hand. Not good means: we have it at its core."

She took the sample cases containing the splinters and examined the markings that Fenna had made with the test marker.

"You marked her," said Klirr.

"Yes," said Fenna.

Klirr nodded. "Then we can recognize her later. That's more than he wants."

Fenna swallowed. "He knows I'm tagging."

"Then he also knows," said Klirr, "that we are not blind. That makes him more cautious. And caution slows you down."

Tilo hesitantly raised his hand. "Um... may I say something?"

Klirr looked at him. "If it's short."

"It's short," Tilo promised, and that was already the first lie, but they let him. "If Malrik can go everywhere... why didn't anyone notice him before?"

Klirr didn't answer immediately. Then she said, "Because he doesn't make mistakes that look like him. And because we all like to believe that the danger is out."

Fenna thought of Santa Claus, of his tired eyes, of the phrase about time as a layer. Santa Claus had known for a long time that the danger was inside. Perhaps he had known it for years. Perhaps this was just the first time someone had dared to show it in such a way that it was impossible to look away.

Klirr, the core snapped shut again. This time, she not only locked it but also affixed a small seal to the bolt – an official inspection mark that means more than a threat in the workshop.

"From now on, nothing will be opened here without me," she said loudly.

"And what if it's urgent?" Rasko asked.

"Then I'm urgent," said Klirr.

It was a kind of joke. He didn't land. But he did his job.

The inspectors began to disperse. The hangar became a hangar again. Tools clattered. Voices returned. The hum of the core once more became part of the background noise.

But Fenna felt something still burning inside her. Not panic. Not anger. More like a concentrated ember.

She didn't want to chase after Malrik. She wanted to understand him. Because when you understand someone, you can find the places where they betray themselves.

"Sparkle," said Klirr, as Fenna was packing her suitcase.

"Yes?"

Klirr stepped closer and spoke so softly that only Fenna could hear. "You won't be walking alone today."

Fenna blinked. "What do you mean?"

Klirr glanced around the hall as if making sure no one was eavesdropping. Then she said, "Niklas trusted you. I do too. But trust isn't a shield. It's a direction. And I don't want you going in the wrong direction."

Fenna felt her heart briefly warm, which was a strange sensation in a room full of metal.

"Who's coming with us?" asked Fenna.

Klirr brought the voice back to normal. "Tilo."

Tilo froze as if he'd just been promoted to reindeer. "Me?"

"You," said Klirr.

"But I... I'm not a detective."

"You're not a wrench," Klirr said. "And yet you use one."

Tilo opened his mouth, closed it again, and finally nodded. "Okay."

Fenna looked at him. Tilo wasn't a hero. That was the good thing. Heroes like to do big things. Tilo did small things. Small things were crucial at the moment.

"Where to?" asked Tilo.

Fenna looked at Klirr.

Klirr looked at Fenna.

Then Klirr said: "You don't follow Malrik. You go where he hides his things."

Fenna felt her mind immediately begin to trace paths. Malrik had access across workshops. He had niches. Drawers. Places that no one controlled because they believed they were controlled.

"His table," Fenna said quietly.

Klirr nodded. "Not directly. Not obviously. But you will go there. And you will look without touching. You will see if there is anything there that shouldn't be."

Fenna nodded slowly. "And what if we find something?"

Klirr held his gaze. "Then we know that they are not just patterns. Then we know that there is a source."

Fenna closed the suitcase. She felt as if she were carrying a stone with her, but it was a good stone: heavy, real, impossible to ignore.

She and Tilo set off, out of the hangar, into the corridors of the light factory.

And as they walked, Fenna heard a faint laugh somewhere in the distance.

Not by Malrik.

From someone else who laughed at a joke that Fenna couldn't hear.

That didn't make it any better.

Because if Malrik didn't laugh, but the light show did, then that meant: The world wasn't broken yet. It was just being tested.

## Resentment

The path to Malrik's table didn't lead through grand gates, guard posts, or dramatic warning signs. It led through habit.

That was the insidious thing about places where work is constantly being done: the most important thing is rarely where everyone is looking. It's where everyone has long since stopped looking, because they think they've already done the looking. Like how you eventually stop noticing that a step wobbles ever so slightly, until one day you step on it with a tray full of hot tea and suddenly the world consists of a great many decisions.

Fenna went ahead. Tilo walked directly behind her, with the expression of an elf who has been sent into a room full of dark corners and is now discovering that dark corners are not content with simply being dark, but also look as if they might make noises.

"You're going too fast," Tilo whispered.

"I'm going normally," Fenna whispered.

"Normal today feels like too fast."

Fenna slowed down slightly. Not for Tilo, but for herself. Going too fast leads to small mistakes. And small mistakes were the one thing she couldn't afford right now, because Malrik made big ones out of them.

They reached the alcove where Malrik worked. Alcove was almost too kind a word. It was more like a small crease in the workshop, a place where shelves left just enough space for a table, a stool, and a few crates. A place you didn't enter unless you absolutely had to, because it was somehow quieter there than anywhere else. Not less loud, but quieter. The sounds here were muffled, as if the air itself had decided to listen.

Malrik's table was empty.

Empty in the sense that no one was sitting at it. Not empty in the sense that it was tidy.

On the tabletop lay pieces of wood, neatly arranged. A half-finished wheel. A blade that gleamed so brightly it seemed as if it delivered a little sermon on discipline every evening.



Beside it, an inconspicuous box, without a lock, without a label, without anything that might scream "Secret!" And that was precisely why it screamed "Secret!" so loudly that Fenna could almost feel it in her teeth.

"Don't touch it," Tilo muttered immediately.

"I know," said Fenna.

"I'll tell you anyway, in case you forget."

"I won't forget it."

"You forget the best things in the worst moments."

Fenna stopped a step away, as if the table had an invisible edge that one may only cross if one knows exactly what one is doing. She let her gaze wander. Not frantically. Not greedily. She examined everything like a measuring instrument: attentively, but without emotion.

There was sawdust on the floor. That was normal. There was sawdust everywhere.

Except that in one spot the sawdust was darker. Not like "dirty". More like "the paint has decided to live here".

Fenna knelt down. Not directly at the dark spot, but beside it, and shone the small lamp over it. The light bounced across the grains, lingered on the darker area, and became... duller. As if it were less willing to return.

"There," whispered Fenna.

Tilo leaned forward. "This is just..."

He stopped because Fenna didn't answer and because the light did indeed look different.

Fenna took the test strip from her pocket. She didn't hold it against the stain, not directly. She placed it on a clean spot next to it, just to have a reference, a marker: This is where it starts. Then she withdrew the strip.

"What is that?" Tilo asked, very quietly.

Fenna exhaled slowly. The word that Klirr had allowed her to utter lay in her mind again like a stone. A heavy, useful stone.

"Resentment," she said.

Tilo stared at her. "That sounds like... like..."

"Like something you wouldn't want in your house," Fenna said.

"Is this real?"

"It's real enough to slow down a clock and tire fabric."

Tilo swallowed. "And this is just lying... right here?"

Fenna looked back at the table. "Nothing is easy."

She stood up slowly and let her gaze drift over the edge of the table. She looked for the obvious and didn't find it. Malrik wasn't the type to leave a jar labeled "Evil Powder" lying around. Malrik was the type to hide it inside an innocuous object and then pretend the object was offended when it was suspected.

Fenna looked at the box.

She didn't touch it. She only leaned closer, as if the truth could be extracted simply by looking. There was a tiny mark on the edge of the box. Not from dust. From frequent opening. The lid was slightly loose, as if it had been lifted often, but always carefully.

"The box," Tilo whispered.

"Yes," said Fenna.

"Don't touch."

"I know."

Instead, she looked at her surroundings. At the shelves. At the crates. At the workshop beyond, where elves ran, carried, laughed, and grumbled, and nobody noticed that a small island existed here where the air tasted different.

Fenna noticed something else: On a shelf directly above the table, a corner of the wood was slightly chipped. A tiny chip. A splinter that had already come loose.

She pulled her case closer, opened it a crack, and took out the sample container with the first splinter. Just a moment. A glance. The mark she had made. Then she closed the case again.

She had no idea if it was the same splinter. But she knew: splinters had formed up here. And underneath was soot.

Grollruß wasn't just "soot, but nastier." That was the kind of explanation you'd give kids to stop them asking at night if the cupboard cast a shadow. Grollruß was something that formed when something warm was hissed at long enough until it stopped burning and started consuming. You couldn't just shovel it like coal. You had to... make it.

And to make it, you needed time, a place, and the will to spoil things without getting dirty yourself.

Fenna swallowed. "We need to get some clinker bricks."

"How?" asked Tilo. "Just go up and say: Malrik has..."

"No," Fenna said. "Not like that. We have to..." She searched for the right path, one that didn't lead directly into Malrik's trap. "We have to secure the area without touching it."

"How do you secure dust without touching it?"

Fenna looked at him. "You take in your surroundings."

She pulled a small, transparent sample sheet from the case, a thin film that is placed over surfaces to capture particles without chasing them with her fingers. She held it in her hand, but hesitated.

"That's touching," Tilo whispered.

"That's measuring," whispered Fenna.

She placed the foil next to the dark spot, not directly on it, and very gently smoothed it down with the back of the tweezers. A barely visible membrane picked up a few grains. Fenna peeled the foil off again and placed it in a sample container.

Then she did the same thing in a spot on the shelf where the wood looked fresh, as if someone had worked there more often with dusty hands than they would admit.

She sealed the case.

Tilo stared at her as if Fenna had just tried to stuff snow into a bottle.

"Is that enough?" he asked.

"It's enough to show that something is here," said Fenna. "And it's enough to be able to compare later."

"Compare," Tilo repeated, as if he could taste the word. "You and your comparisons."

Fenna almost smiled. Instead, she just nodded because her gaze suddenly fell on something she would have initially thought was a joke, if her mind still had room for jokes today.

A tiny thread clung to the edge of the table. A dark thread, like the coarse thread Malrik had bought in the sack section. Not long. Just a remnant, almost invisible.

But he was there.

And he connected things that shouldn't have been connected.

Fenna felt her stomach clench. The sack department. The cut pieces. The thread. The dot. Everything fell into place like a puzzle whose picture she never wanted to see.

She took the test mark and, instead of pressing it against the thread, she lightly pressed it against the edge of the table next to it. A silent hint for later.

"We weren't here," Fenna whispered to Tilo.

"What do you mean?"

"If anyone asks, we weren't here," Fenna said. "We're leaving now. Quietly. And we'll pretend we got lost and accidentally ended up in places no one should see."

Tilo nodded, very seriously. "I can get very convincingly lost."

"I know," said Fenna.

She closed the suitcase and took a step back. And at that moment, as if the light show had decided to give them one last little thrill as a parting gift, Fenna heard a voice behind her.

Not close. Not direct. But close enough.

"You are standing there as if you were looking for something."

Fenna stopped, turned slowly, and saw an elf with a box full of ribbons. She looked curious, not suspicious. Curiosity was normal here. It was a place full of things that glittered. Of course, people get curious.

"We are looking for..." Fenna smiled kindly, as kindly as one smiles when one has just discovered that the ground beneath one's feet is not safe, "...the shortcut to the hangar."

The elf laughed. A genuine laugh. Innocent. And Fenna realized how much she suddenly liked that sound, because it was the opposite of resentment.

"This way," said the elf, pointing.

"Thank you," said Fenna.

She set off, Tilo close behind her, both with the feeling that they had just glimpsed something that belonged not only to Malrik, but to a darker part of the Lichterwerk that no one likes to admit.

And as they walked down the corridor, Fenna knew: now that she had found Grollruß, it was no longer just a hunch.

Now it was one thing.

And things demand that you finish them.

They didn't go directly to Klirr. Going directly is a kind of approach only made by people who either have nothing to hide or believe that hiding is a myth. Fenna had already thoroughly disproven both of those ideas today.

So they first took the roundabout route familiar to any elf who has ever tried to fetch a cup of tea without getting caught up in three conversations, two tasks, and a spontaneously declared ribbon-making race. The roundabout route led past shelves, through a corridor that smelled of glue, and then along a corner where there was always someone standing who wanted to "just quickly" show someone else something.

Today, two elves stood there whispering about whether the large clock in the bag department had really been wrong, or whether it was just "that one moment" that one would later prefer to file away as a collective hallucination.

"It was only five minutes," said one of them.

"Five minutes is half a life if you're late," said the other.

Fenna walked past without turning her head. Tilo almost tripped over his own foot trying to look both inconspicuous and alert at the same time, resulting in a facial expression somewhere between "I just saw a ghost" and "I just found a cookie up my sleeve."

"Breathe," Fenna whispered.

"I'm breathing," Tilo whispered back.

"Not so loud."

"I can't breathe more quietly. This is... breathing."

"Then breathe normally."

"Normal feels suspicious today."

Fenna would have laughed if the image of the dark stain in the sawdust hadn't constantly flashed before her mind's eye. The soot wasn't like ordinary dirt that you wipe away and then pretend it was never there. Soot was like a memory embedded in the fibers. You could perhaps remove it, but you couldn't simply forget it. It had weight. And, even worse, it had direction.

They reached a section of the workshop where the sounds became wider again, more chaotic. Elves were running, carrying, laughing, and cursing. One was pushing a box full of bells, and each bell seemed convinced it had to prove to the others that it could jingle the most bell-like.

Tilo flinched as the box rattled past them.

"This is just Christmas," said Fenna.

"Christmas was just a little bell a moment ago," Tilo murmured.

Fenna stopped. Not abruptly, but rather in a way that seemed like a spontaneous decision. She raised her gaze and let it sweep over the crowd.

"What are you doing?" asked Tilo.

"I'm checking to see if we're being watched."

"Who would observe two elves simply walking?"

Fenna looked at him. "Someone who knows that two elves who are just walking usually aren't just walking."

Tilo nodded immediately. Then he looked in the other direction in a panic, as if observation could jump out from corners.

Fenna forced herself to remain calm. She didn't look for Malrik, because Malrik was waiting for exactly that. She wasn't looking for a face, but for what happened around a face: pauses in movements, glances that lingered too long, steps that adjusted.

And there was indeed something.

An elf stood by a shelf of paint cans, pretending to read labels, but in reality he was simply reading the world around him. He wasn't Malrik. He was younger, rounder, with a face that hadn't yet decided whether it wanted to be friendly or suspicious.

But he looked in her direction. Too often.

Fenna lightly touched Tilo's arm. "There."

Tilo followed her gaze, too quickly. The elf noticed, picked up a can as if he had just discovered it, and turned away.

"Was that..." Tilo whispered the word "der" as if it might explode.

"No," said Fenna. "But he might be part of... what Malrik built."

"Malrik builds people?"

"Malrik builds habits," said Fenna. "And habits build people."

They continued on. This time not towards quality control, but to a small alcove that had once been intended as storage and now primarily served as a place to park things that no one officially parked. A forgotten crate. A half-finished frame. Two ladders, each claiming to be the right ladder if you just believed in them enough.

Fenna placed her suitcase on a crate and pretended to adjust a buckle. In reality, she pulled out one of the sample envelopes, held it briefly up to the light, and checked whether the foil was still properly sealed. The dark dust inside looked as if it were not only absorbing the light but spitting it back in a huff.

Tilo watched. "We're really going to Klirr with this, aren't we?"

"Yes," said Fenna.

"And then what happens?"

Fenna exhaled slowly. "Then someone tries to prove that we're exaggerating."

"And what if you don't exaggerate?"

"Then someone tries to make it smaller."

"And what if it's not small?"

Fenna closed the suitcase again. "Then it will happen that it grows big, regardless of whether anyone wants it to."

Tilo swallowed. "That sounds like one of those sentences you later carve in wood."

"If you see him anywhere, tell him not to quote me."

They continued walking, now in the direction of Klirr. And when they reached the corridor to quality control, the door was already ajar, as if it had sensed that things would be coming in today that would rather not knock.

Klirr was not alone inside.

That was the first shock.

The second shock was who was standing there.

Santa Claus. Niklas. Whatever you wanted to call him, he was a presence that made a room breathe differently. He stood at the table, contemplating something Fenna couldn't see because the clanging blocked her view. Next to him stood Brann, the Time-Worker, looking as if he wished he had a wrench big enough to set the world right again.

Klirr turned her head as Fenna entered, and there was no surprise in her gaze. Only this short, precise: You've got something.

"Sparkle," she said.

"Inspector," Fenna said.

Niklas looked at Fenna. His gaze was calm, but it held a weariness that didn't come from lack of sleep, but from responsibility.

"You've found something," he said.

Fenna placed the suitcase on the table. Her fingers weren't trembling. She was surprised by this herself. Perhaps that was the advantage of being afraid long enough: eventually, fear transforms into a kind of clarity.

"At Malrik's table," Fenna said.

Brann raised an eyebrow. Klirr remained motionless. Niklas blinked once, slowly, as if he were not only hearing the information but internalizing it so it wouldn't slip away later.

"Show me," said Klirr.

Fenna opened the case and placed the sample envelope containing the foil on the table. Then the second one. Then, hesitantly, the envelope containing the splinter.

Klirr picked up the foil and held it up to the light. Brann stepped closer, his face tense. Niklas wasn't looking at Fenna, but at the material. He examined it the way one examines an injury: not out of curiosity, but to determine its depth.

"That's it," Brann said quietly.

Klirr looked at Fenna. "Where exactly?"

Fenna described the niche, the sawdust, the dark stain, the mark on the shelf, the thread remnant on the edge of the table. She said it calmly. Without dramatic words. Without "I think." Just "I saw."

When she was finished, the room was silent. A silence that wasn't comfortable. A silence in which decisions are made.

Niklas placed his hands on the table. Not heavily, not threateningly. More as if he were making sure the table was really there.

"Resentment," he finally said.

The word was now in the room. No longer forbidden. No longer whispered. Simply there, like a shadow that cannot be talked away.

Brann cursed softly. Klirr nodded slowly.

"And Malrik?" asked Niklas.

Fenna looked at him. She knew what he was asking without him saying it.

"I didn't see him with his hand in the dust," Fenna said. "But I saw his niche. And I saw that he knew I was looking."

Klirr slid the sample vials into a metal case that had suddenly appeared on the table, even though Fenna could swear it hadn't been there a moment ago. Klirr could make things appear when it mattered.

"That's enough," said Klirr.

"Enough for what?" asked Tilo, who had remained silent like someone hoping that silence would make him invisible.

Niklas looked at him, and surprisingly, Tilo didn't shrink, he just became very quiet.

"Enough," said Niklas, "to stop pretending it was a coincidence."

He looked at Fenna. "Well done."

Fenna felt her stomach relax briefly, as if someone had untied a knot. Praise from Santa Claus wasn't a caress. It was a burden that briefly felt lighter.

The cassette closed with a clang. "From now on," she said, "there are no more open paths. No more free niches. No more quiet corners that belong to no one."

Brann snorted. "Then we'll have to rebuild half the factory."



"Then we'll rebuild it," said Klirr.

Niklas nodded once. "And we'll check the sled again tonight."

"Tonight?" Tilo asked, and his voice sounded like a squeaking wheel.

"Tonight," said Niklas.

Fenna looked from one to the other. She felt something shift in the air. This was no longer just a search. This was the beginning of a hunt.

And somewhere, I'm sure of it, Malrik Splitterbart sat at his table, carving a new little wheel and waiting for it to do exactly what he wanted.

## One mistake too many

There are two types of errors in workshops.

The first kind is friendly. It happens when someone is tired, when their hands are faster than their brain, when a screw refuses to go where it's supposed to, and you try anyway because you tell yourself that screws respect good humor. These mistakes are annoying, but they're human. You curse, you laugh, you correct them, and in the end, you even feel a little better because you've shown the world: It may be crooked, but we can straighten things out.

The second type of mistake is not friendly.

She seems friendly. She's in disguise. She acts as if she's the first type, just with a slightly different hat. And that's precisely why she's so dangerous: because people want to put her in the same category. Because they want to normalize her. Because nobody likes standing in a room and saying out loud: This isn't an accident. This is intentional.

Evening had fallen in the light show, in a way that one can only discern at the North Pole by the behavior of the lights. They flickered no less, but their flickering was more weary. The chains glittered as if they had been playing "Merry!" all day and had now reached the point where one wonders whether "Merry!" is truly a character trait or merely a contractual agreement.

Fenna stood in the hangar, and the hangar was different now. Not in its physical structure—metal remained metal, wood remained wood—but in its atmosphere. People moved more quietly. Not slower, just quieter. As if someone had switched the lights to the mode where you walk across creaking floorboards at night so as not to wake anyone, even though you know perfectly well the house is already awake.

Niklas was back.

Not in the middle of the hangar, not like that morning in the baggage compartment, where his presence had changed the atmosphere. Here he stood at the edge, his hands behind his back, watching the sled as if he were watching an old friend breathe. It was a strange kind of

intimacy: he wasn't touching anything, but you could feel that his gaze carried more weight than half a toolbox.

Klirr was there, of course. Brann was there, because Time Workers apparently have the unpleasant habit of showing up when problems don't just involve time, but somehow always do. Rasko was there, Tilo was there, and Fenna was there, with her suitcase, her markings, and the feeling that she'd just stepped into a room full of matches while someone else had already spread the kerosene.

"We're taking it slowly," said Klirr.

"Slow is a lie," Brann muttered.

Klirr looked at him. "Slow is a method."

Brann raised his hands as if surrendering. "I like methods. As long as they don't insult the clock."

Fenna leaned over the core. The sled hummed. No louder than usual. No different. And that was precisely what made it so disconcerting: how normal something can seem while silently changing.

She attached the probe, took measurements, and recorded them. Rasko logged the data. Tilo followed instructions to pretend he couldn't see anything. He did so convincingly that he occasionally missed things, but nobody was perfect, and Tilo was a touching exception.

"Values?" Klirr asked.

"Still within limits," Fenna said, and she hated that sentence because it felt like a band-aid on a spot that really needed stitches.

"Trend?" Klirr asked.

Fenna looked at her notes. "Lowering."

Klirr nodded, as if inwardly ticking a box on something she had long feared. "Then we're not looking for a bang. We're looking for the creeping."

Niklas said nothing. But Fenna noticed his gaze linger on the cover. Not just on the metal. On the edges. On the little world of screws and latches.

"Seal?" he finally asked.

Klirr pointed to the test mark she had affixed. It was intact. Unbroken. Undamaged.

"Good," said Niklas. It didn't sound like relief. It sounded like: This is one thing that hasn't gotten worse.

Brann stepped forward and held up the small tube containing the grain from the clockwork. He held it like a trophy he despised. "This stuff isn't the same everywhere. I checked two

other clocks. Nothing. But the one clock in the east wing had..." He hesitated. "...a trace. Not much. Just enough to wipe away."

"Did you wipe it away?" Klirr asked.

"No," Brann said, offended. "I'm not eighteen."

Klirr nodded. "Good."

Fenna looked towards the catwalk. The shadows up there lay like dark shrouds over metal. And she involuntarily thought of the bell, of the moment when all heads had turned. A signal. A test.

A mistake that wasn't a mistake.

Tilo cleared his throat. "Um... if he knows we're checking..."

No one asked who "he" was. That was the unsettling thing. They all had the same name in mind, and they didn't want to blurt it out too loudly, as if the name itself could open a door.

"If he knows we're investigating," Tilo continued, "then he'll do something else, won't he?"

Klirr looked at him. "Yes."

"What?"

Klirr pointed at Fenna. "He makes mistakes that we only notice later. He shifts things around. He makes us look to the right while something tilts to the left."

Fenna felt the words sink in. She knew it. She had seen it. But hearing them aloud made it harder to calm herself down.

Rasko lifted his head from the protocol. "Inspector, if we assume it's Grollruß and that someone has access—"

"Don't accept it," said Klirr. "Determine. We have samples."

"Then we can't secure everything at once," Rasko said. "We can't be everywhere."

"No," said Klirr. "But we can decide where it hurts the most."

Niklas looked up. "The sled."

"The sled," Klirr confirmed.

Brann snorted. "The sled is the heart. Whoever hits the heart hits everything."

Fenna thought about the bag department. About the holes. About the dots. About the clock. And she suddenly understood: It wasn't "everything." It was a path. A path that stretched from the small to the large, like a crack that only appears when you've already put too much weight on it.

"He's working his way up," she murmured.

Klirr nodded. "Yes. And because he's working his way up, we have to prevent him from taking the next step."

"What's the next step?" Tilo asked, and this time his voice didn't just sound nervous. It sounded angry. Tilo was angry because someone was abusing his tools, his craft, his pride to destroy something that everyone here more or less considered their life's work.

That was good. Anger can be dangerous. But anger can also be energizing.

Klirr looked at Niklas. It was a silent exchange, so quick that Fenna could barely grasp it. Then Klirr said: "We're checking the load capacity. Now. Full."

"Full?" Rasko repeated.

"Full," said Klirr.

That was the moment everyone understood that "testing" today didn't mean ticking a box and nodding in satisfaction. It meant deliberately pushing the sled to its limits to see if it would hold up. It was a risk. But it was also the only way to force a creeping flaw to reveal itself.

Tilo ran off to fetch the test weights. Two other elves arrived with straps and clamps. The weights were loaded, step by step, evenly distributed. Fenna helped, checking the straps and feeling the tension.

Everything was quiet.

Almost too quiet.

And then, as the sled creaked slightly under the extra load – nothing serious, just the sound of wood saying: I'm here – Fenna heard another sound.

A quiet, metallic click.

Not from the sled. Not from the core.

From the side.

Fenna turned her head and saw a small box on the wall near the tool station. An old box that had been ignored for years because it was simply hanging there, and nobody knew what it was for. At the North Pole, things you don't understand are often lovingly ignored, as long as they don't start smoking.

A small display, a pointer that normally stood still, hung on the box. Now it twitched.

One tick. Another tick.

Brann saw it too. "What is that?"

"This is..." Tilo had just returned and stopped. "This is the backup line."

Fenna blinked. "Reserve line for what?"

Tilo stared at the box. "For the core. In case the main line..."

He broke off because Fenna realized: reserve lines don't move. Reserve lines are like spare blankets. You only notice them when it gets cold.

"Why is she twitching?" asked Fenna.

Brann was already there, leaned forward, and listened. "Because something is switching on somewhere."

Klirr stepped forward. Her face was calm, but Fenna saw in her eyes: That's the mistake.

That's one too many.

The pointer twitched once more, then stopped.

And in this silence, in which everyone was staring at the box, a noise was suddenly heard that was much worse than any bell.

A quiet, dry crackling sound.

It's as if a tiny crack were forming somewhere in a pipe.

Not big.

Just enough.

The dry crackling was so quiet that almost no one would have heard it if everyone hadn't stopped listening to the tools at that exact moment.

Tools are the great deceivers of the trade. They're always making noise so you think noise is normal. And then, when a noise comes that isn't normal, you have no point of reference anymore because you've spent all day swimming in an ocean of clattering, whirring, and "Damn it, where's the damn key?"

Brann slowly straightened up, as if afraid that quick movements would startle the crack and make it larger. He placed his ear at an angle against the small box, but not directly, more as if giving the thing a chance to voluntarily tell the truth.

"That didn't come from here," he muttered.

"From where then?" Tilo asked, his voice uncomfortably high-pitched. Tilo wasn't built to deal with things that couldn't be persuaded with a wrench.

Brann nodded toward the wall where the wires ran. Wires in the lighting system are like veins: you see them, you know they're important, and yet you rarely think about what happens when someone does something incredibly stupid with a tiny needle.

"Reserve line," said Brann. "If that one kicks in, it means the main line has twitched."

“But the main line—” Rasko began.

“—shouldn’t flinch,” Klirr finished.

She stood there, her hands behind her back, and Fenna noticed how much Klirr had to restrain herself from immediately striding forward and threatening everyone with a pen. Klirr was the type who liked to stare at a problem until it finally collapsed in shame. This problem, however, obviously had no shame.

Fenna went to the wire without touching it, just close enough to see. Under the light, the metal strand looked normal. No soot marks. No holes. No dark spots brazenly hiding on the surface.

And yet it had cracked.

"That's inside," Fenna said quietly.

Niklas had stepped closer, silent as a shadow that had decided to be friendly. He didn't look at the line like a mechanic; he looked at it like someone who had already experienced how something very small could change something very big.

"Is the core stable?" he asked.

“Not yet,” Fenna said automatically, and immediately hated herself for it because she now used the word like a curse.

Brann snorted. "When the backup power line kicks in, it's like a heart that briefly skips a beat. You notice it, but you don't know if it was just a stumble or the beginning of something that will later become very expensive."

“Expensive,” Tilo muttered.

Klirr glanced at him. "Don't say it like it's money."

“I didn’t mean money,” Tilo said. “I meant...” He gestured vaguely at the sled, at the core, at the whole idea of Christmas. “Everything.”

"Good," said Klirr. "Then we mean the same thing."

Rasko pushed up his clipboard, as if he could use it to support reality. "If the pipe is torn inside, we have to check it. That means: opening it up."

“Open it,” Fenna repeated, and she felt her stomach tighten.

Opening meant access. Access meant possibilities. Possibilities meant: Malrik.

Klirr didn't say it. But her gaze automatically drifted to the hangar entrance, as if she expected Malrik to be standing there, politely asking if he could help, while already holding the next grain in his other hand.

"We are securing the hangar," said Klirr.

"How?" asked Brann. "With a sign?"

"With eyes," said Klirr. "And with hands that don't reach everywhere."

She pointed to two hangar elves who had been working quietly at the edge. "You two. Door. No in, no out, unless we say so."

The two nodded immediately. Not because they feared a clang, but because even the most easygoing elf eventually realizes that certain faces are not to be discussed.

Fenna felt the air in the hangar thicken. Not from smoke, but from heightened awareness. Everyone here was too alert now. And too alert also meant: too close to the edge.

"What about him?" Tilo asked quietly, and although he didn't say a name, everyone knew who he meant.

Klirr replied: "If he is here, he will show himself."

"And what if he's not here?" Fenna asked.

Klirr looked at her. "Then he's where we don't look."

Fenna thought of Malrik's table. Of the dark stain in the sawdust. Of the box. Of the web of small things he left everywhere. It was like a trail of splinters: not enough to kill instantly, but enough to slow you down until you eventually collapse.

Niklas placed a hand on the edge of the workbench. "We're opening," he said.

That wasn't a command like a clatter. That was a sentence that sounded like a judgment. When Santa Claus says, "We're opening," you open. Not out of fear, but because you know he doesn't make that decision lightly.

Brann put on his gloves, the thicker ones this time. "If there's a tear on the inside, it's possible that—"

"—that the core loses stability," Fenna said.

Brann nodded. "And then it gets cold."

At the North Pole, cold was a common word. It was so commonplace that sometimes one didn't really feel it anymore. But at its core, cold wasn't weather. Cold was a state of being. A state that said: The miracle ceases to sustain itself.

Rasko took tools. Fenna took her lamp and tweezers. Tilo took... mostly courage, as much as he could find, and held onto it as if courage were a slippery thing that likes to slip through your fingers.

They went to the cable. The cable led to a cover in the wall, a panel with screws that no one had loosened for years because, in practice, "spare cable" usually means "the thing we never need".

Brann positioned the screwdriver. He turned it slowly, as if each screw demanded a decision. One by one, it came loose. The panel came off, and behind it was a shaft, dark, narrow, full of metal and dust, that hadn't seen anyone in a long time.

Fenna shone her light inside.

The light hit a spot where the metal... didn't look metallic. Not rusty. Not dirty. More like dull. As if something had worn the surface down from within.

"There," said Fenna.

Brann leaned forward, cursing softly, this time without humor. "Damn it."

There was a paper-thin line in the pipe. A crack that had just begun. It was so fine that you could mistake it for a scratch, if you didn't know that metal doesn't just decide to crack on a whim.

Fenna shone the light even more closely. And then she saw it.

Not a large stain. Not a dramatic clump of soot. Just a tiny dark spot, exactly where the crack began.

A point that pretended it wasn't there.

"Gritty resentment," Brann muttered.

"Yes," Klirr said softly.

Fenna felt her head go cold as her heart raced. This was it. This was the next step. Not just bags, not just watches, not just shards of glass on the casing. Now it was the infrastructure. The things no one checks because they think they're boring.

That was Malrik's art: he made the boring deadly.

"We need to isolate it," Rasko said.

"And replace," Brann said.

"And secure it," said Klirr.

Niklas said: "And find out how it gets in there."

Fenna heard the emphasis. Not "what". Not "if". "How".

Because what is the question that hurts a perpetrator? What is the question that reveals whether someone has access, has time, has peace? And Malrik had all of that.

"Who has access to this shaft?" Fenna asked, and this time it didn't sound like curiosity, but like a blade that finally knows what it's for.



Rasko looked at the cover as if he'd never actually seen it before. "Just core crew. And maintenance."

"Maintenance who?" asked Klirr.

Rasko hesitated. Then he said: "Across all workshops."

A sentence that sounds harmless enough, but today was like a footprint in fresh snow.

Fenna looked at Niklas. Niklas looked back. There was no surprise in his gaze. Only that weary determination one feels when realizing that a problem isn't new, but merely finally visible.

"One mistake too many," Tilo muttered.

"Yes," said Fenna, and she sensed that this wasn't just a saying. It was a turning point.

Because now that they had seen the point in the shaft, no one could pretend it was just a series of stupid coincidences. Now it was an attack on the heart.

And you don't respond to attacks on the heart with bandages.

They are answered with hunting.

There comes a moment when a workshop ceases to be a workshop and becomes a battlefield.

Not because someone suddenly starts brandishing swords. Workshops are more pragmatic. They use screwdrivers. And these screwdrivers are usually already nearby anyway, because someone was just looking for them. No, the moment comes quietly: when everyone realizes that the problem is no longer about "repairing," but about "preventing."

Fenna stared at the fine crack in the reserve fuel line and realized she was holding her breath. It was a silly reflex, because you can't affect metal with your breath. But you hold your breath when you're afraid of making something worse with a noise that's already bad enough.

Brann was the first to move. Time workers have an innate aversion to inactivity. "That's fresh," he said, pointing to the spot in the shaft. "So fresh, I'd almost bet whoever put it there is still in the building."

"We are all in the building," Tilo murmured.

"Not all of them intentionally," Brann said.

Klirr leaned forward without reaching into the shaft. She didn't look like someone experiencing panic. Klirr wasn't panicking either. Panic is imprecise. Klirr didn't like imprecision.

"We are closing," she said.

"Close it?" Rasko sounded as if someone had just suggested he decorate an open wound with a pretty sticker.

“Hangar and core access points,” Klirr specified. “All of them. Immediately.”

Two hangar elves standing by the door nodded again, only this time it wasn't a ceremonial nod. It was the nod of people who understood that "door" today didn't mean "door," but "border."

Niklas was still standing calmly, but Fenna saw that something in his posture had changed. Before, he had been the observer, wearing responsibility like a coat. Now he was someone who was pulling a coat tighter because the wind was changing.

"How long will the exchange take?" he asked.

Brann made a sound like laughter that had decided against it at the last moment. "If we have everything we need: two hours. If we don't have something: all night and a few curses that I'm saving for special occasions."

"Then we have it," said Klirr.

“We didn’t—” Rasko began.

Klirr looked at him. "We've got it."

Rasko remained silent. Fenna could practically see his brain trying to adjust to this new reality in which Klirr could own things by claiming them.

Fenna felt her gaze drift to the edge of the hangar. Not to the door. To the shadowy area beyond, where walkways and shelves created enough angles for a human to hide. Or an elf who had learned how to position themselves in a room so that they only appear when it's useful.

"He knows that we opened the shaft," Fenna said quietly.

Tilo looked at her. "Where from?"

Fenna pointed to the shaft, to the spot. "Because this doesn't happen unless someone wants it to. And someone who wants it to happen also wants to know if we notice."

Brann nodded. "Someone who steals time also wants to see how you react. How fast you are. How predictable."

Klirr stood upright. "Then we give him no predictability."

Fenna blinked. "How?"

Klirr pulled her metal box closer, but didn't open it. She simply placed it on the table, visible, heavy, important. A box that said: There's something in here you don't want.

“We’re officially securing the samples,” Klirr said loudly enough for anyone who happened to be nearby and happened to have exceptionally good hearing to hear. “Brann, you take this. Rasko, you accompany him. Funkel stays in the hangar.”

Fenna felt the urge to protest. She knew why Klirr wanted to keep her here: Fenna was a measurement. Fenna was a sensor. And Fenna was... bait, whether she liked it or not.

Tilo looked at Fenna, horrified and at the same time a little proud, because he apparently believed Fenna was a particularly competent piece of bait.

"Inspector," Fenna began.

Klirr raised only one hand, and that was that ruler-like feeling again. "You're staying."

Niklas said nothing, but his gaze met Fenna briefly. A look that wasn't an apology, but an acknowledgment: It's not fair. But it's necessary.

Brann picked up the cassette as if it were hot. "If it's me walking through the corridors with it, everyone will see it."

"Exactly," said Klirr.

Brann grimaced. "I don't like being visible."

"Then you shouldn't have become a time worker," Tilo muttered.

Brann glared at him. "And you shouldn't have been breathing if you didn't want to be heard."

"I'm working on it," Tilo said immediately, dead serious.

Fenna suppressed a laugh. It was the wrong situation for it, but that somehow made it more important. If you can no longer laugh, resentment has won, even before it eats away at the metal.

Brann and Rasko set off, the cassette between them like a small coffin for something that didn't want to die yet. The hangar door was half-closed behind them, not locked, but guarded. A controlled crack. A crack that said: We'll let air in, but no surprises.

A small group remained in the hangar: Klirr, Niklas, Fenna, Tilo and two hangar men who could lock doors with their eyes.

Klirr knelt down by the shaft again. "We'll replace this section of pipe," she said. "Now. But without rushing."

"No rush," Tilo repeated.

"No rush," Klirr confirmed.

"That's..." Tilo searched for words. "...like 'without snow' at the North Pole."

Klirr looked at him. "You talk too much."

"That helps me not to scream," said Tilo.

Klirr accepted it, which was basically a gift.

Fenna watched Niklas. Santa Claus stood there like someone who was already three moves ahead in his mind. He was no longer just looking at the sleigh, but at the people around him. At their hands. At the paths. At the places where you could quickly turn away.

"Fenna," he said suddenly.

She looked up. "Yes?"

"You have found the first splinter," he said, not as a question, but as a fact.

Fenna nodded. "Yes."

"And you marked him," Niklas continued.

Fenna felt the test tag in her pocket as if it were getting warm. "Yes."

Niklas glanced briefly at Klirr, then back at Fenna. "If Malrik..." He spoke the name, and that alone made the air tense. "...if he really is the one doing this, then he won't stop just because we're replacing a line. He'll try to overtake us."

"With what?" asked Fenna.

Niklas's gaze slid to the core. "With coldness."

The word fell like a stone.

Fenna swallowed. "Then we have to be faster than his coldness."

"Or smarter," said Klirr, without looking up.

Tilo tentatively raised his hand, as if this were school again. "May I say something clever?"

Klirr sighed. "If it's really wise."

Tilo cleared his throat. "If Malrik wants us to react... then maybe we should... react incorrectly."

Fenna stared at him. Klirr looked at him. Niklas looked at him.

Tilo blushed because he suddenly realized he had the attention of three people who rarely look in the same direction at the same time.

"So," Tilo continued, faster, "not wrong-wrong. But so wrong that it's right. So that he thinks we're doing one thing, and then we're doing something else."

Brann would have laughed if he had been there. But Fenna felt something click in her head.

"A lure," she said.

"A lure," Klirr confirmed, and for the first time that evening, there was something like satisfaction in her voice. Not joy. Satisfaction is what Klirr feels when a plan takes a turn.

“We let him believe that the rehearsals are the most important thing,” Fenna said slowly.

“They are,” said Klirr.

“But not only that,” Fenna added.

Niklas nodded. "Exactly."

Klirr stood up, dusted off her knees, and looked around the room. There was something in her gaze that Fenna hadn't noticed so clearly before: Klirr wasn't just an inspector. Klirr was a fixed point. If the North Pole had a compass, the needle would hesitate briefly tonight and then point to Klirr.

“Tilo,” said Klirr.

“Yes!” Tilo sounded as if he had just been promised a medal and simultaneously shown a pit.

"You don't leave the hangar," Klirr said. "You stay with Funkel. You are visible. You are working. You are normal."

“Normal,” Tilo repeated, immediately looking as if that was the hardest thing for him to do.

“And you,” Klirr said to Fenna, “mark everything you see. Not just on the sled. In the hangar. In the paths. In the shadows.”

Fenna nodded.

Klirr turned to the hangar crew. "You check the walkways. Every screw, every railing, every stupid spot where you could hang a bell."

The two nodded, and this time it sounded like: Finally, we're allowed.

Klirr finally looked at Niklas. "And you..."

Niklas raised his eyebrows slightly. It was amusing to see someone like him being addressed by Klirr. As if two forces of nature were having a brief conversation, without it actually snowing.

“...you will not go alone,” said Klirr.

Niklas smiled slightly. "That wasn't my plan."

"Good," said Klirr.

She reached for her bag, pulled out a pen as if it were a weapon, and went to the door.

Fenna followed her gaze. "Where to?"

Klirr paused briefly and looked back. "I'll pay a visit."

"With whom?" asked Tilo, his voice almost cracking with curiosity and fear.

Klirr didn't answer immediately. Then she said calmly:

"The one who hasn't been checked for too long."

And she walked out as if the aisle in front of her automatically straightened itself.

Fenna stopped in the hangar, heard the hum of the core, the crackling of the line in his head, and the faint echo of Klirr's footsteps.

One mistake too many had led her here. Now something else was beginning.

More than just repairs.

No longer just searching.

Now began the phase in which Inspector Klirr herself became a question that one would be better off not answering incorrectly.

## Inspector Klirr

That's a difference you only understand when you see someone who never stumbles, never hesitates, and never makes the mistake of simply "walking through" somewhere. She moved like a ruler that had decided to test the world itself. The corridor in front of her didn't widen, but it suddenly seemed narrower, as if it were afraid she might probe it for irregularities.

It was late evening, the lights in that strange in-between hour when the chains still glitter but the voices grow fainter. When places grow weary, they make fewer sounds that matter and more sounds that merely pretend. An occasional creak in a beam. A distant tinkling of something that most certainly shouldn't be a bell again. A breeze that sounds as if it's apologizing.

Klirr recorded these sounds the way other people perceive the weather. Except her weather report always sounded like this: Caution. Caution. Caution.

She didn't turn towards the hangar, not towards the bag department, not towards the Time Factory. She went where nobody likes to go, because there you're constantly reminded that doors aren't abstract ideas, but very real things with very real weaknesses.

The bolt chamber was located behind an unassuming wooden door that pretended to be a storage room. The sign read "ROPS." Below it, someone had added in chalk: "and a few curses."

There was no knocking. She pressed the handle and entered as if the door had already given her permission.

Inside, it smelled of oil, metal, and old wood. Not the cozy, old kind of wood. More like wood that had seen countless keys and hadn't trusted anyone since. Hooks with bolts, bolts with

hooks, locks with locks, and a few other things that looked as if some particularly imaginative elf had once tried to invent a lock that could only be opened by telling it a life story.

An elf sat on a stool, looking as if he were made of knots. Knots in his back, knots in his fingers, knots in his facial expression. He polished a key, slowly, deliberately, with the concentration of a man who suspects every piece of metal of secretly speaking.

"Master Riegel," said Klirr.

The elf didn't raise his head immediately. He polished it twice more, then laid the key down as if telling him: Be good. Only then did he look up.

"Clatter," he said. It didn't sound like a greeting. It sounded like a statement. "You're late."

"I am precise," said Klirr.

"Being punctual is usually late for people who like to think they are on time," grumbled Master Riegel.

Klirr approached the table. "I need a list."

"You always need a list."

"Today I need one that you don't like to give."

Master Riegel narrowed his eyes. "That's not a good way to motivate me."

"Then I'll motivate you in a different way," said Klirr.

She put nothing on the table. No cassette. No sample. No dramatic test tube. She simply laid her palm on the wood, still and flat, and said: "Someone was on the backup line from the core."

Master Riegel paused. For a moment, even the oil listened.

"That's not my area," he said after a silence that seemed to last too long.

"Yes," said Klirr. "Because someone had to go past a door that doesn't open by itself."

Master Riegel stared at her, then snorted. "When you talk like that, it always sounds like the building has legs."

"That's how it's moving today, at least," said Klirr.

Master Riegel stood up. He wasn't tall, but he had the kind of presence you acquire when you've spent decades being the one who says "No" while everyone else says "Oh, come on." He went to a shelf and pulled out a thick book. It wasn't a book to read. It was a book to fear. Leather-bound pages, covered in small, neat handwriting and even neater notches along the edges, as if someone had wanted to freeze time itself while writing.

"You want access," he growled.

"I want paths," Klirr corrected.

"Paths are access points."

"Don't say the word as if it were a virtue."

Master Riegel turned the pages. His fingers were astonishingly delicate for someone who tamed metal daily. He paused at a page, tapped a line with his nail, and Klirr saw his face harden slightly.

"Across all workshops," he muttered, and this time it didn't sound like a neutral word, but like a sign of bad taste.

"Who has it?"

Master Riegel frowned. "Many."

A clattering sound awaited. Their silence had the quality of filling spaces.

Master Riegel sighed. "Who are you looking for?"

"You know it," said Klirr.

He flipped through the pages again, paused, and typed. "Malrik Splitterbart."

Klirr inhaled silently. She didn't need to. She already knew the name. But seeing it here, in Master Riegel's book, was like a nail in wood: real. Solid. Indisputable.

"Since when?" she asked.

Master Riegel ran his finger along the line. "Since..." He stopped. "Too long."

Klirr looked up. "Who approved it?"

Master Riegel closed his mouth as if he had just bitten down on a nail.

"I said I need a list that you don't like to give out," Klirr said.

"This is not a story one likes to tell," growled Master Riegel.

"Then don't tell me," said Klirr. "I don't have time for that today."

Master Riegel stared at her as if weighing whether he'd rather upset her with a clatter or the night. He chose the latter.

"It was Alva," he finally said.

Klirr blinked once. "Grandma Alva?"



“Back then she wasn’t Grandma,” said Master Riegel, and there was that special tone in his voice that old elves have when they remember that time doesn’t just eat clocks, but people too. “Back then she was... the one who held things together before they fell apart.”

Klirr fell silent for a moment. The name Alva was not just a name. It was a weight. A piece of industrial history that still lives on.

“Why did Alva give him a cross-workshop contract?” Klirr asked.

Master Riegel ran his finger over a marginal note. “Because Malrik was good. Because he was fast. Because he showed up wherever someone was swearing. And because he...” He hesitated. “Because he helped back then.”

"What about?" asked Klirr, although she already suspected the answer and still had to hear it, because suspicions are not proof.

Master Riegel didn't look up. "In case of a fire."

Klirr felt the room grow a touch colder. Fire. Sparks. Wood. Soot, consuming heat and transforming it into something else.

"He helped," Klirr repeated slowly.

“Yes,” said Master Riegel. “He was everywhere. He unlocked bolts. Opened doors. Led people out. And then...” He shrugged. “Then Alva said: Give him the way. He knows it anyway.”

Klirr looked around. The bars on the walls suddenly seemed less like tools and more like possibilities.

"And you?" asked Klirr. "You just entered it."

Master Riegel finally raised his head, and his gaze was old enough not to be hurt. "I record what is decided. I don't decide who is good."

"No," said Klirr. "You only decide who can be everywhere."

Master Riegel growled because that was too close to the truth.

Klirr pointed at the book. "I need the passages where he last used a path."

Master Riegel sighed. "This isn't so easy. Paths are... quiet."

"Everything is quiet if you don't look," said Klirr.

Master Riegel opened a second drawer. Inside were small metal plates, each with tiny grooves. "I have something," he said reluctantly.

Klirr leaned forward. "What?"

He picked up a small plate. "Impression plates. When a key is used often, it leaves patterns. Small notches. A signature. You can't see it if you don't know it's there."

Klirr didn't take the plate. She just looked at it. "And?"

Master Riegel held it up to the light. "This pattern is new."

"New?"

"New in the sense that it's there, but it shouldn't be," said Master Riegel. "An extra flaw. A small notch. As if someone had..." He searched for a word, found it, and hated it. "...reworked it."

Klirr felt lines forming in her mind. Splinters with notches. Wood shavings with notches. Now a key notch. It was as if someone were leaving the same small, nasty fingerprint everywhere, only in different materials.

"Someone has changed a key," said Klirr.

Master Riegel nodded slowly. "Or made a new one that pretends to be old."

Klirr looked at him. "Can you show me which path was used most often?"

Master Riegel flipped through the pages again, tapped on several entries, murmured department names, niches, catwalks, shaft entrances. Klirr absorbed it, organized it, and filed it away in her mind like building components.

Then Master Riegel said quietly: "Clink."

She looked up.

"If you take away Malrik's path," he said, "he won't stop. He'll just find another door."

"Then I'll make the other door visible," said Klirr.

Master Riegel laughed dryly. "You're stubborn."

"I am thorough," Klirr corrected.

She turned towards the door. Outside waited the light installation, this enormous, glittering creature that was just figuring out whether it had a heart or was just a very beautiful facade.

"Clink," said Master Riegel once again.

She paused without turning around.

"If Alva protected him back then," he said, "then maybe she will again. Not out of malice. Out of... habit."

Klirr merely nodded, almost imperceptibly. "Then it's time to examine the habit."

She went outside.

And behind her, the door of the locked chamber closed with a soft click that sounded so final, as if the building itself had just decided not to be open everywhere anymore.

Klirr stepped back into the workshop, and the workshop acted as if everything were normal. That was its favorite lie. It glittered, it hummed, it made elves run back and forth, as if someone had wound up the whole place like a toy that must never stop, because otherwise the silence would demand it.

Klirr had no patience for lies. Not because she was naive, but because she considered lies a waste of resources.

She didn't walk straight ahead; she walked purposefully. That is to say, in such a way that her steps didn't look like a trail of red arrows. Someone who walks purposefully is inconspicuous. Someone who is inconspicuous receives more truth.

In one corner stood an elf with an armful of tinsel, as if he had decided to transform himself into a tree if the shift lasted long enough. He took a step aside when there was a clatter and nodded quickly.

"Inspector," he said.

"You're too nervous," said Klirr.

The elf blinked. "Me... me?"

"Yes. You. Nervousness is a marker."

The elf tried to smile, failed, and held the tinsel tighter, as if it would give him support.

"I'm just..." He searched for a word. "...happy."

"Happy is softer," said Klirr and walked on.

Behind her, she heard the elf exhale softly, as if she had just examined him not only, but also shifted him by two centimeters. That was the case with many of them. Clattering displaced people. Not intentionally, but inevitably. She was like a piece of furniture suddenly standing in the room, forcing everyone to rethink their movements.

She turned into a corridor that was less gleaming. Here, the light wasn't decorative, but practical. No stars on the walls, just screws. No garlands, just cables. And there was no scent of cinnamon in the air, but the more honest smell of metal that had been heated and was now cooling again.

Klirr liked these corridors. You can't pretend well when the glitter is missing.

She didn't take out her notes. Notes are dangerous when someone is watching. She kept everything in her head, where it belonged, and organized it like tools in a box.

Malrik. Across workshops. Old permit. Brand. Alva.

And the small notch.

This notch was what really bothered Klirr. Not just because it was a pattern, but because it was a pattern someone had deliberately left behind. Patterns are either the language of the world or the language of people who want to make the world say something specific.

Klirr stopped in front of another door that didn't look locked, but seemed locked nonetheless. Such doors aren't held by fear, but by habit. Habit is the strongest lock in the light factory. It ensures that people don't enter without the need for even a bolt.

The sign read: WAREHOUSE – OLD STOCK. Underneath, someone had written in chalk: “If you're looking for it, it's here. If you find it, it was never gone.”

There was a clattering sound. Not out of politeness. Out of respect for the material. Then she went inside.

The room was full of things no one wanted to throw away because things at the North Pole aren't simply things. They're possibilities. A broken star can become a spare part for a lamp tomorrow. An old skid can become a shelf support. A bent hook can... well, stay bent, but at least it'll sit on the shelf and not hurt anyone. Most of the time.

Grandma Alva sat among boxes that smelled of past winters.

She wasn't sitting in a rocking chair. That would be too cliché, and Alva detested clichés because they too often lead to a situation where one no longer needs to look. Alva was sitting on a sturdy wooden crate that had once contained emergency snow shovels and now obviously served as a throne. A piece of fabric lay on her knees, and she was sewing at it as if she had decided that time at the North Pole was just another seam that needed to be tied neatly.

She didn't look up immediately. She sewed three stitches, then another, then put the needle down and raised her gaze.

"Clink," she said.

For Alva, a name always sounded like a memory. Not sentimental, but rather precise. As if she knew how many winters a name had already endured.

“Alva,” said Klirr.

"You're late," said Alva.

"I am precise," said Klirr.

Alva laughed softly. It wasn't a giggle. It was that short laugh that says: Yes, yes, I know your way of life.

“If you're precise, you're always too early for those who oversleep and too late for those who run,” Alva said. “Sit down.”

Klirr didn't settle. Klirr stood still. You sit when you have time. Klirr didn't have any today.

Alva scrutinized her with that look that doesn't check if you have dirty shoes, but if you brought the dirt with you.

"What's burning?" Alva asked.

"Nothing," said Klirr.

Alva raised an eyebrow. "That's the answer of people who are about to get angry."

Klirr moved closer to the box, but not too close. Proximity is a kind of pressure. Klirr preferred to translate pressure into numbers.

"I was at Master Riegel's," said Klirr.

"You only go to Master Riegel if you're looking for doors," said Alva. "Or if you're looking for someone who uses doors."

Klirr was silent for a moment. Alva was good. Not because she was clairvoyant. Because she had observed for a long time without drawing attention to herself. That was an art Klirr respected, even if she herself was too angular for it.

"He told me who had given approval across all workshops," said Klirr.

Alva's fingers paused briefly, just long enough for Klirr to notice. Then Alva continued sewing as if nothing had happened.

"He did," said Alva.

"He mentioned your name," said Klirr.

Alva pulled the thread through, tightened it, and said, "Of course he does."

Klirr waited. That was the problem with Alva: she was so calm that you sometimes wondered if she even felt any urgency in the world anymore. But Alva had her own urgency. She was simply quiet.

"Malrik," said Klirr.

The name hung in the room like a piece of ice that had been accidentally brought into the warm living room.

Alva pierced the fabric with the needle. A clean stitch. Then another. Then, without looking up, she said, "You want me to tell you what you already believe."

"I want you to tell me what you know," said Klirr.

Alva didn't smile. Alva rarely smiled because at the North Pole, smiling often serves to smooth things over that actually need to have rough edges.

"I know that Malrik helped back then," said Alva. "When the sparks flew in the Polarhof. When people panicked. When doors jammed. When smoke got into corridors that still smell of fear today if you stick your nose in them."

Klirr said nothing. She let Alva talk. That was the only thing that truly worked with Alva: patience.

"He was fast," Alva continued. "Too fast for someone who supposedly just happens to be everywhere. He had a talent for showing up exactly where things were needed. And do you know what you do with people who have talent?"

Klirr replied: "They are given access."

Alva nodded. "They are given a key. They are given responsibility. And they hope they don't find out how easily responsibility turns into power."

Klirr felt her jaw tense. "You gave him the opportunity."

Alva looked up. Her eyes weren't soft. They were old and sharp. "I gave him the path because I thought he'd use it to hold things together."

"And now he uses it to take things apart," said Klirr.

Alva put the piece of fabric aside. Her hands rested on her knees, and suddenly the room seemed a touch smaller, as if it had realized that something important was being said.

"Clatter," said Alva, "I've seen many winters. Many disasters. Many small mistakes that became big ones. And I've also seen many people who weren't evil until they decided it was easier that way."

"Is Malrik evil?" Klirr asked.

Alva exhaled. "That's a word people use when they don't want to imagine that someone might have reasons."

Klirr remained firm. "Does he have reasons?"

Alva looked past Klirr as if gazing into a time that no longer exists. "Malrik never knew joy," she said softly. "Not the kind of joy that's contagious. He felt... relief when something worked. That was all. And when the world only gives you relief, eventually you start looking for something that feels more. Even if it's ugly."

Klirr swallowed it all without acknowledging it. "He has access. He leaves patterns. There's resentment."

Alva's face remained still, but a shadow crossed her eyes. "So, the time has come."

"So far for what?" asked Klirr.

Alva reached for a small tin that stood among old spools of thread. She didn't open it. She just held it, as if it were a heavy keepsake.

“For the kind of winter where we have to stop being nice,” Alva said.

Klirr nodded slowly. "Then you'll help me."

Alva lifted the can slightly. "You didn't come to ask if I would help. You came to decide that I would help."

“Yes,” said Klirr.

Alva laughed briefly. "You're really precise."

“We must block his path,” said Klirr.

Alva shook her head. "If you take away his path, he'll build a new one. The boy... the elf... he builds paths like others build toys."

Klirr felt something harden inside her. "Then we'll build a way to catch him."

Alva looked at her for a long time. Then she nodded, very slowly. "Then you need bait."

Klirr thought of the cassette. Of Brann and Rasko, who were carrying it through the factory. Of the hangar, which was now a trap, without anyone saying so aloud.

"I have bait," said Klirr.

"Then you need the second one," said Alva.

"What?"

Alva held Klirr's gaze. "Someone who still knows Malrik. Not as a suspect. As a person. Someone he might listen to before he strikes."

Klirr felt an uncomfortable moment when she realized that Alva wasn't referring to Fenna. And not Niklas. And not Brann.

Alva meant Alva.

"You want to talk to him," said Klirr.

“I want to see him,” said Alva. “And you want that too. Because if you just chase him, he’ll chase you back.”

Klirr remained silent for a moment. Then she said, "You are not going alone."

Alva sighed. "That's what I thought."

Klirr turned towards the door as if the decision had already been made. "Come."

Alva stood up, slowly but effortlessly. She reached for an old scarf that had seen more stories than most books. She draped it around her and looked at Klirr.

"Clink," she said.

"Yes?"

"If this really is Grollruß," said Alva, "then Malrik isn't the only thing you need to look for. Grollruß doesn't just come from one heart. He comes from a source. And sources are rarely alone."

Klirr nodded once. "Then we'll find the source."

They went out into the corridor, two elfin women, each dangerous in her own way.

And somewhere in the light show, between glitter and shadows, someone was waiting for Klirr to do exactly what they expected.

Except that Klirr wasn't known for meeting expectations.

They didn't go together like two friends getting a late cup of tea.

They left like two people who know that what they are about to see will stay with them forever.

Alva had a step that was slow but not uncertain. It was slow like a winter, not like old age. Klirr missed its mark, precise, crisp, as if she were slicing the air into straight lines. And yet they fit together. It was that unsettling kind of fit you only find between things that belong together in times of crisis.

"Where to?" asked Alva.

Klirr didn't answer immediately. She let the walk continue for a while until the noise from the factory hall drew closer again. Then she said quietly, "To the paths."

Alva nodded, as if she had expected it. "Riegelwege."

"Not only that," said Klirr.

She turned into a side passage that led to one of the old service tunnels. These tunnels had been built in the past so that pipes could be serviced without turning the workshop into a construction site every time. Today, they were rarely used. "Rarely used" is, at the North Pole, a nice way of saying "perfect for people who don't want to be seen."

Klirr stopped in front of a metal flap. It looked like many other flaps. That was the problem again: things that look the same make it easy for perpetrators. And perpetrators like it when they can hide in uniformity.

Alva leaned forward. "This is a maintenance access point."

"Yes," said Klirr. "And he has been used."

"How can you tell?"



Klirr pointed to the screw head. It was slightly scratched. Nothing serious. Nothing noticeable. But for Klirr, it was a scream.

Alva smiled briefly, dryly. "You see scratches like other people see stars."

"Stars are simpler. They don't lie," said Klirr.

She didn't take out a key. She didn't take out any tools either. She simply pulled a small, flat piece of metal from her pocket – a test hook, which is only needed to check whether a lock actually works as intended. Klirr applied it, felt the tension with her fingertip, and let the hook work briefly.

A soft click.

The flap gave way.

Alva raised an eyebrow. "You have a key."

"I have experience," said Klirr.

"That's just the prettier word," Alva grumbled.

Klirr opened the hatch just enough to shine a light inside. A shaft, dark, dusty, narrow. Pipes, cables, a few old brackets. Nothing dramatic. Nothing that screamed "Sabotage!"

And yet it smelled different.

Not oily. Not metaly.

A hint of something that feels like cold ash.

Alva inhaled sharply. "That..."

"Yes," said Klirr.

Alva didn't whisper the word. She said it like a painful statement: "Resentment."

Klirr nodded. "Not much. But enough to say: someone was in here."

Alva leaned back. "And you want... what?"

Klirr looked at her. "I want to know where this path leads."

"You can't just climb down any shaft," Alva said. "You're..." She looked Klirr up and down. "Too straight for shafts."

"I don't have to go in," said Klirr. "I just have to mark it."

She didn't pull out the test mark—that was Fenna's tool. Klirr had her own way of doing things. She took a small packet of fine, light-colored powder. It looked like chalk. But it

wasn't chalk. It was test dust. Invisible until viewed under a specific light. A means of making traces visible without leaving any traces itself.

Alva saw it and sighed. "Of course you have something like that."

"Of course," said Klirr.

She sprinkled a tiny amount around the edge of the flap, exactly where hands would reach. Then she closed the flap again, letting it click into place as if nothing had ever happened.

Alva stared at her. "You're setting a trap."

"I'm going to pose a question," said Klirr. "And whoever answers it will reveal themselves."

They continued walking.

The next path led them past the workshop, to a place most elves would never willingly go: the attic walkways beneath the dome. Up there, it's not cold in the sense of "weather." It's cold in the sense of "you don't belong here." You feel it in your bones, because the dome is a boundary, and boundaries are always a bit unfriendly.

They climbed a narrow staircase, metal steps that sounded with each step as if loudly commenting on the footprints. Alva took the steps slowly but surely. Klirr took them silently, which was unfair because Klirr wasn't built to be quiet, and yet she was when she wanted to be.

Above, a narrow passageway opened up along the dome's supporting columns. Through small windows, one could see into the night: blackness, wind, and starlight that, up here, seemed like a memory. Inside, strings of lights glittered, pretending to have replaced the sky.

Klirr stopped and looked at a spot where a catwalk was attached to a dome strut.

A piece of railing.

Unobtrusive.

And yet: A tiny thread hung from it.

A dark, coarse thread, almost like the ones from gift bags.

Alva leaned forward. "He's everywhere."

"He's cautious," said Klirr. "And that makes him arrogant. Caution is only dangerous if you believe you're invisible."

Alva didn't pick up the thread. She didn't touch it. She only looked at it, and Klirr noticed that Alva's eyes were searching for something deeper than material.

"The thread is not just a thread," Alva said quietly.

"Rather?"

Alva shook her head. "But it's a memory. He was there back then, too. During the fire. There were these rough threads everywhere. Sacks that had ripped. Threads hanging where they didn't belong. At the time, I thought it was chaos."

Klirr felt a cold thread pull at her back. "And it wasn't chaos."

Alva looked at her. "Perhaps it was already a pattern back then."

Klirr had to force himself not to run off immediately. If there was a pattern even back then, then Malrik hadn't fallen from the sky. He had... grown. And someone had allowed that growth to happen.

"Who knew about it?" asked Klirr.

Alva didn't answer immediately. Then she said, "Not many. And those who suspected it didn't want to say it out loud. Because it's more convenient to see a fire as an accident than as..." She searched for the word. "...preparation."

Klirr nodded slowly. "Then this winter isn't the first."

Alva turned to the window and looked out into the night. "And he won't be the last if you don't stop him."

Klirr stood beside her. Two shadows against the starlight.

Downstairs in the light factory, everything kept working. On and on. Because work here isn't just work, it's a kind of prayer: if we keep going, things will stay good.

Klirr now knew: Continuing on was not enough.

They had to do things differently.

She turned around. "We're going to the hangar."

Alva looked at her. "You think he's going to strike there."

Klirr nodded. "Not necessarily. But he'll want us to believe he's striking there."

Alva smiled dryly. "So you'll catch him at his own game."

"I will catch him where he goes," said Klirr.

They went back down the stairs, back into the glitter and the noise.

And as they left, Klirr thought of Fenna standing in the hangar, visible, marking, playing normally.

And she thought of Malrik, who was sitting somewhere in the factory and probably knew perfectly well that Klirr had now stepped onto the stage.

If Malrik thought he could test Klirr, he would soon realize: Klirr was not a test.

The clatter was a verdict.

## The wrong labels

When Klirr and Alva returned to the hangar, the air had changed. Not visibly—air is rarely polite enough to change visibly—but noticeably, like a room that had decided not to tell its jokes today.

Fenna stood by the sled, suitcase within reach, her gaze shifting. She had perfected the art of inconspicuousness by conspicuously playing at "working normally." This works surprisingly well because in a workshop, nobody pays much attention as long as you look like you have more work than you want.

Tilo stood beside her, holding a piece of rope as seriously as if he were conducting an interrogation. He had intended to be normal, and failed in a way that was almost touching. For Tilo, normality was more of a legend, something other elves told each other to help them sleep better at night.

Klirr approached without making the group appear large. She was good at that. Those who become too large get noticed. Those who are noticed become part of someone else's plan.

Alva stayed half a step behind Klirr, as if she were a shadow one doesn't deserve but endures. Her eyes wandered over the hangar, over the catwalks, over the doors. She didn't just see things. She saw stories. And stories are dangerous because they show you what you've overlooked.

"Everything quiet?" asked Klirr.

"Quiet enough to be creepy," Fenna murmured.

Tilo nodded vigorously. "That's the worst kind of silence."

"The worst kind of silence is when nobody asks any questions anymore," said Alva.

Fenna glanced at her briefly. It was strange to see Alva here like this, outside her realm of old things and old truths. Alva in the hangar felt like a grandmother in a wrestling match: you don't know how it happened, but you're suddenly very sure it's serious.

"Brann and Rasko?" Fenna asked.

"On the road," said Klirr. "With our pretty box."

"And Malrik?" asked Tilo, and his face betrayed that he would have preferred not to have the name in his mouth, because names are sometimes like doors.

Klirr didn't answer immediately. Then she said, "Malrik is where he wants to be."

"This is... not at all reassuring," Tilo muttered.

"Our goal right now is not to calm the situation," said Klirr.

Niklas stood a little way off, near the workbench, speaking quietly to two hangar workers. He didn't seem frantic. He seemed... focused. Fenna had realized by now that this was his most dangerous state of mind. When Santa Claus is focused, it's not "We'll manage." It's "We'll manage because we have to."

Klirr stepped closer to him, and Fenna saw Niklas's gaze briefly shift to Alva. For a heartbeat, there was something like recognition. Not surprise. More like an ancient knowledge resurfacing.

"Alva," said Niklas.

"Niklas," Alva said, as if they were meeting not in a hangar full of creeping sabotage, but by chance by a wood-burning stove. "You look tired."

"I have too much to carry," said Niklas.

"Then carry less alone," Alva said.

It was no consolation. It was a sentence that shifted responsibility precisely to where it belonged.

Klirr cleared his throat. "We found traces on paths. And threads."

Niklas nodded. "Then he moves."

"He's always moving," Fenna said quietly.

Niklas looked at her, and Fenna realized that he now remembered her voice, not just her face. "Yes," he said. "And today he's moving faster."

Klirr opened his mouth to say something – and was interrupted.

Not from an alarm.

From an eleven.

A young elf burst into the hangar, breathless, as if he'd been hit by a snowball that had suddenly become a problem. He was clutching a handful of paper strips, and he looked as if he'd just seen his favorite cookie fall to the floor and not only lie there, but start staring at him.

"Inspector!" he gasped.

Klirr turned to him. "Breathe."

The elf breathed. Once. Then again, this time in a way that sounded somewhat like a living being. "The labels..." he managed to say.

Fenna felt something tighten inside her. Labels weren't just paper. Labels were direction. Labels were that little bit of order that turned a mountain of gifts into a route.

"What about the labels?" Klirr asked.

The elf held up the strips of paper. "They're not right! Well... they look correct, but... they're wrong. The codes. The star points. The... the pattern."

Brann would have said that patterns always lie when someone feeds them. Fenna only thought it.

"Where?" asked Fenna.

"In the labeling station," said the eleven. "In order picking. We've already sorted three boxes... uh... incorrectly."

Tilo inhaled sharply. "Three crates are already—"

"—too much," said Fenna and Klirr at the same time.

Niklas was already moving. Not quickly, but decisively. A clatter followed immediately. Fenna grabbed her suitcase. Tilo grabbed... mostly Fenna, by staying close behind her as if she were the only warm spot in a suddenly very cold night.

The labeling station wasn't far, but the route still felt like a path where someone had invisibly strung threads. Fenna now saw possibilities everywhere in the aisles: a box someone could be standing behind, a catwalk from which to observe, a shelf with a blind spot.

Alva walked beside Fenna, surprisingly light on her feet. "Etiquette," she murmured. "That's clever."

"Because?" asked Fenna.

"Because it doesn't make holes," Alva said. "No points that you find in a sample. It only makes false trails. And false trails are the kind of mistakes you only notice when you get to the finish line."

Fenna swallowed. This was exactly the kind of sabotage the work hated most: not the obvious, but the insidious. No bang. Just a quiet "oops," heard only when it's too late.

Chaos reigned in the label station – but that was normal. It was just... a different kind of chaos than usual. Normally, label chaos was a joyful chaos: rustling paper, clacking stamps, elves laughing at children's absurd wish lists because there's always one child who wants "a real dragon, but a lovable one."

Nobody laughed today.

Today, elves stood hunched over lists as if the lists had suddenly become enemies. A stack of labels lay on the table, and above it hung the smell of freshly printed ink—a smell that normally signifies hope, but today felt like a fake perfume.

An elf with ink stains on her fingers looked up as Klirr entered. "Inspector," she said, and the word sounded like a lifebuoy thrown into very cold water.

"Show me," said Klirr.

The elf slid a sheet of labels forward. Fenna stepped closer and saw the small symbols: name, location, star points, the internal code that only the lighting system understands, because otherwise you'd end up with far too many wrong chimneys in one night. Everything looked... correct.

Until it wasn't anymore.

Fenna pulled out her small magnifying glass and held it over one of the codes. The code consisted of tiny dots and lines that felt like jewelry to the eye, but were in reality a language. Fenna knew this language. She spoke it in her sleep.

"That's a mirror image," Fenna said quietly.

The elf froze. "What?"

"The star point cluster," Fenna said. "Here – it's mirrored. That means the label says north when it means south. It says left when it means right. And it looks like a printing error."

Klirr leaned forward. "How many bows?"

"Ten," the elf said quickly. "Maybe more. We only noticed when the sorting process started going strangely."

Niklas picked up a label, looked at it, and Fenna saw his forehead wrinkle just slightly. It was the kind of wrinkle that says: This will be expensive, but not in money.

"Who last adjusted the printing roller?" Klirr asked.

Several elves looked at each other. This mutual stare was the second problem after the labels. It was the moment when responsibility spread through the room like dust.

"I..." one of them began.

"And I..." began another.

Then a voice from the background, calm as a knife that has been sharp for a long time, said:

"If something is mirrored, it's due to the leadership. Or to someone who knew how to shift leadership."

Fenna turned her head before she meant to.

Malrik Splitterbart stood at the edge of the station, his hands clean, his posture unremarkable. He wasn't breathless. He wasn't surprised. He looked like someone who happened to be passing by, because he always happens to be where problems happen to arise.

His gaze slid over the labels, over Fenna, over Klirr, and lingered for a moment on Niklas.

“So much fuss about paper,” said Malrik.

And in this sentence lay the whole poison of the sabotage: the diminution.

Fenna felt her jaw tense. Paper wasn't small. Paper was the map that finds the miracle.

Klirr said nothing. She looked at Malrik, and this time her gaze held more than just scrutiny.

This time, her gaze conveyed a decision.

When Malrik said "paper", he didn't mean paper.

He said: You're exaggerating. You're ridiculous. You're a bunch of elves who get upset over printed pulp.

It was an elegant act of sabotage. Not the mistake itself, but the atmosphere it sowed: doubt. And doubt is the favorite breeding ground for resentment, because it slows everything down without anyone noticing that they're already freezing.

Fenna forced herself not to react immediately. Her first reaction would have been to throw the magnifying glass at Malrik. That probably wouldn't have solved anything, except that Malrik would have had a magnifying glass. And he looked like someone who could use lenses very effectively as a weapon.

Klirr took a half step forward. Not aggressively. Just enough for the room to subconsciously understand: Here is the line.

“Splinterbeard,” said Klirr.

Malrik tilted his head slightly. "Inspector."

"You are everywhere mistakes happen," said Klirr.

“Mistakes happen everywhere,” said Malrik. “I’m working. I’m moving.”

"You move in a very purposeful way," said Klirr.

Malrik didn't smile, but his eyes narrowed slightly, as if he had understood the sentence as a compliment he didn't deserve but gladly accepted nonetheless.

"If you have any problems here, I can help," he said. "Reflections are mechanical. You adjust it and that's it."

Fenna saw how some of the elves in the station unconsciously looked towards Malrik, like plants towards the light. That was the second part of his art: he offered "help," and at the North Pole, help is a religion. Those who offer help are rarely suspected of having created the problem. They are seen as the solution, not the cause.

“No,” said Klirr.



The word fell like a bolt from the blue.

Malrik blinked. "No?"

"You're not helping," said Klirr. "You're just standing still."

The station became so quiet that one could hear the rustling of a single label crumpled between someone's fingers because their nerves needed something to occupy them.

Malrik's eyes briefly scanned the room. A quick look that assessed: Who is where? Where are the open paths? Where are the doors? Where is Santa Claus?

Niklas was still standing at the table, calm, as if watching a storm decide which direction to take.

"Why?" Malrik asked, and the word sounded too clean. Not like genuine curiosity. Like a test.

Klirr replied: "Because you have access. Because you want to be here. And because from now on I decide who stands at a machine."

"You don't decide that alone," Malrik said quietly.

Alva stepped out of the crowd. She hadn't said anything until then, but her presence was like an old beam: you don't notice it until it suddenly creaks.

"She decides that," said Alva.

Malrik slowly turned his head towards her.

The moment Malrik saw Alva was fleeting, but Fenna saw it. A tiny shift in posture. A hint of... surprise? Or something similar, but not the same. It was as if someone had opened an old chapter that Malrik would have preferred to leave closed.

"Alva," said Malrik.

Alva didn't smile. She looked at him as if examining a splinter in the wood: not with hatred, but with the knowledge that such things must be removed before they cause an infection.

"Boy," she said.

The word was like a hammer blow because it made Malrik feel smaller. And Malrik didn't like being made to feel small.

"I am not a boy," said Malrik.

"You're someone who acts like one," Alva said. "Only with better tools."

Fenna noticed how the elves in the station held their breath. You could feel this collective: Oh, this is really happening now.

Klirr seized the moment, not for drama, but for work. She turned to the elf with the ink stains. "Shut down the machine. Immediately. No more printing."

The elf nodded, almost grateful to be allowed to do something. She pulled a lever, and the hum of the printing press fell silent. Silence. A silence one usually only hears when something large suddenly stops moving.

"Save all the labels from the last print run," said Klirr. "In boxes. Seal them. Don't mix anything."

A few elves sprang forward, began sorting, stacking, counting. The routine returned like a blanket pulled over the shoulders so one doesn't have to think about the fact that one is currently standing in the same room as a saboteur.

Fenna remained at the table, the magnifying glass still in her hand. She held up a label and looked at the tiny star-shaped dots. A reflection. It was so subtle that it could truly be mistaken. And that was precisely the masterful feat: a mistake disguised as normal.

"Who has access to the printing roller?" Klirr asked.

"Just us," said the elf. "And maintenance, if... if something gets stuck."

"And who is in charge of maintenance?" Klirr asked.

An elf with a wrench in his pocket hesitantly raised his hand. "I... but it wasn't my turn today."

"Who was it?" asked Klirr.

The elf looked around. Then he said quietly: "Malrik was here earlier. He said the machine is squeaking."

Fenna felt her stomach clench. Of course Malrik had said that. Squeaking is a perfect alibi, because machines at the North Pole are constantly squeaking. It's their hobby.

"And?" asked Klirr.

The player shrugged, ashamed. "I let him in. He... turned it a little. Then it was gone."

Alva exhaled, and it sounded like the beginning of a thunderstorm.

"You let him in," Klirr repeated calmly.

"He has... he does have access," stammered the elf.

Klirr looked at Malrik. "You turned it."

Malrik shrugged slightly. "I helped. It was squeaking. Now it doesn't squeak anymore."

Fenna couldn't help herself. "And now the labels are mirrored."

Malrik looked at her. His gaze was blank, but behind it was something Fenna now knew: the pleasure of the game.

"Printing presses are sensitive," said Malrik. "Sometimes things like this happen."

"Sometimes," Klirr repeated. "And sometimes it happens intentionally."

Malrik's eyes narrowed. For a moment, he actually looked like someone who was annoyed. Not because he'd been caught—it was too early for that—but because Klirr had said the sentence one shouldn't say: deliberately. That was the word that turns a problem into a perpetrator.

"Proof," said Malrik.

"Not yet," said Klirr.

"Then this is just... suspicion."

"This is control," Klirr said. She stepped closer so that she and Malrik were now standing in the same air. "You are leaving the station."

"No," said Malrik, and that was the first clear no Fenna had ever heard from him. Not indirectly, not in half-sentences, not in venom. A no that went straight to Klirr.

The station froze.

Niklas took a step forward. Not threateningly, but in a way that made the room understand: This is no longer just workshop politics.

"Malrik," Niklas said calmly.

Malrik turned to him. His face was still, but Fenna saw it stiffen slightly. You might hate or love Santa Claus, but you respect him. Even resentment sometimes respects the idea of power before it consumes it.

"You're leaving," said Niklas.

Malrik held his gaze. Then, very slowly, he nodded.

"Of course," he said. "If the boss says so."

He took a step back. Then another. He didn't move hastily. No flight reflex. More as if he were memorizing the scene so he would know where to start next time.

Before he left, he glanced once more at the label in Fenna's hand. Then he looked at Fenna.

"Reflections are interesting," he said quietly. "You suddenly see things the other way around."

Fenna held his gaze. "Sometimes you see the original."

Malrik blinked. A tiny moment in which something inside him twitched. Then he left.

When he was gone, the air wasn't immediately lighter. It was just... different. Like after a brief frost.

Alva placed a hand on the table, near the labels. "He's playing," she said.

Klirr nodded. "And we're playing now."

Fenna looked at the boxes of labels that were being sealed. "How many are wrong?"

"Enough," said Klirr. "More than a mistake. Less than a catastrophe – if we act quickly."

Niklas looked around the room. "We're reorganizing everything."

A collective sigh went through the station. A collective sigh that said: This is work. A lot of work. But work is better than fear.

But Fenna knew: This wasn't just work. This was a waste of time. And a waste of time was what Malrik lived on.

"He wanted us to waste time here," said Fenna.

Klirr looked at her. "Yes."

"And while we sort..."

Klirr nodded. "...he's doing something bigger somewhere else."

Fenna felt her heart race. She looked at Klirr, then Niklas, then Alva. And in that exchange of glances lay the next decision: Where do you strike when you're the enemy of time?

The North Pole has always been averse to plans. Not out of malice – the North Pole is too tired for malice – but because plans presuppose order, and order here is a kind of polite agreement with chaos.

Nevertheless, Niklas made a plan. He didn't make it with grand gestures, but with glances and concise sentences that resonated through the room like nails.

"You're reorganizing everything," he told the label crew. "No label goes out before it's been checked."

A murmur, a nod, then the rustling of paper, which turns back into work. The elves clung to this task like a ladder on smooth ice. Because when your hands are busy, your head screams less.

Niklas turned to Klirr. "We need someone to check where Malrik can go next."

Klirr nodded. "I have ways."

"I have memories," Alva said softly.

Fenna felt the sentence cast a shadow over the labels. Memories were precious, but they were also dangerous. They could pull you back into things you'd rather have left behind.

"And I am..." Tilo hesitantly raised his hand. "...afraid."

Nobody laughed. And that was a good thing. Fear wasn't a weakness here. Fear was information.

"Good," said Klirr. "Fear wakes you up. As long as it doesn't make you run away."

Tilo swallowed. "I'm not walking. I'm... I'm wobbling."

"Then wobble in the right direction," said Klirr.

Klirr drew Fenna away with a glance, out of the immediate rustling of paper, into a corner where one could speak without every word immediately becoming a rumor.

"He wanted us to lose time," Fenna said again, because she had to keep it in her mouth, otherwise it would become too big in her head.

"Yes," said Klirr. "And he wanted us to commit ourselves here."

"Why?" asked Fenna.

Klirr looked at the printing press. "Because labels are about trust. If you destroy labels, you destroy the confidence that delivery will work. And when that confidence is gone, people get flustered. And flustering leads to mistakes."

Fenna nodded. "And mistakes..."

"...are expensive," Klirr finished, and this time it sounded like a judgment.

Alva joined them. "He's not just a saboteur," she said. "He's a... conductor."

"He wants the piece to sound like an orchestra," Fenna murmured. "Only wrong."

"He wants it to be dissonant," Alva corrected.

Klirr raised a hand. "We need to get out of the dissonance. Not everywhere. Just at the point where he strikes next."

Fenna looked at her. "And where is that?"

Klirr exhaled slowly. Then she said, "If he steals our time, he wants to reach a point where we no longer have time to fix things."

"The sled," said Fenna.

"The sled," Klirr confirmed.

"But the hangar is secure," said Tilo.

Klirr looked at him. "Secured doesn't mean unassailable. Secure only means: We believe we have it under control."

Alva nodded. "And Malrik likes to work with what we believe."

Niklas came over to them. He had that look that said: I've just decided something that nobody will celebrate.

"Clink," he said. "You go back to the hangar. Now."

Klirr nodded as if she had already planned it. "Fenna is coming along."

Fenna felt her stomach tighten. "And the labels?"

"The crew can do it," said Niklas. "They don't need you, they need order. And order can be given to them."

Alva remained silent. Then she said, "I'm coming too."

Niklas looked at her. A brief moment in which you could see him weighing things up: Alva is old, but Alva is also... Alva.

"Fine," he finally said. "But you're sticking with clanging."

Alva raised her eyebrows. "I don't stay with anyone."

Klirr said dryly: "You stay beside me, Alva. That's not the same."

Alva snorted. "Fine by me."

They left.

The way back to the hangar was faster, not because they were running, but because no one stopped them. It's astonishing how quickly people make way when Inspector Klirr and Santa Claus are walking in the same direction, as if they've decided that the direction is a matter of life and death.

When they reached the hangar, the two hangar workers were still standing at the door. They nodded, let them in, and closed the door again.

Inside, the sled was there, large, quiet, humming. The humming today didn't sound like a sleeping animal, but like an animal lying awake, pretending to still be asleep because it didn't want to spread panic.

Fenna went straight to the core. She checked the seal. Intact. She checked the liner. No new scratches. She checked the edges. No new chips.

"Clean," she murmured.

"Cleanliness is suspicious," said Klirr.

“Sometimes, clean is just clean,” said Fenna.

"Not today," said Klirr.

Alva walked slowly along the sled, her hand not on the wood, but on the air, as if sensing the shape without touching it. She stopped at one point, close to the load-bearing point, where the straps are attached.

"Here," said Alva.

Fenna stepped closer. "What?"

Alva pointed to the belt loop. "The ring is... different."

Fenna knelt down and shone the lamp. The ring was round. Metallic. Normal.

Until you looked closely.

There was a tiny scratch on the inner edge. Not new. Not old. Somewhere in between. A scratch that looked like it had been made by a slight twist. As if someone had twisted the ring ever so slightly and then back again to check how much play it had.

“Someone has been working on it,” said Fenna.

Klirr stepped closer. "Who works on belt loops?"

“Nobody,” said Tilo, who appeared behind them. “Well... nobody, unless something is broken.”

Klirr nodded. "Then it's intentional."

Fenna felt her mouth go dry. "What if..."

"When the load-bearing capacity gives way," Brann's voice suddenly said from the entrance.

Brann and Rasko came in, both with a look that betrayed they had thought at least three times on the way here: This isn't going to get any better.

"The cassette?" Klirr asked.

Brann lifted her up. "We had company."

Fenna felt a tingling sensation. "Malrik?"

Brann shook his head. "Not Malrik. But someone who was watching us. A young elf. Too curious. Too quiet."

Alva murmured: "Then he has helpers."

Klirr said nothing, but you could sense her drawing a line in her head: Malrik was not alone. Or at least Malrik had people around him whom he could manipulate like figures.

Rasko approached Fenna and looked at the belt loop. "That's... small."

"Small is the beginning," said Fenna.

Niklas stood there, still, looking at the ring. Then he said: "We are exonerating them."

"What?" asked Tilo.

"We're taking the test weights off," said Niklas. "Now."

Klirr raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Because he wants us to put ourselves under stress again," Niklas said. "He wants us to test. And he wants it to happen during the test."

Fenna swallowed. That was smart. If Malrik had set a trap at the load-bearing point, then another load test was the moment it would snap shut.

"Then we won't test," said Fenna.

Klirr nodded slowly. "We test differently."

Alva looked at the clinking sound. "How?"

Klirr looked at the ring. "We are building a burden that only looks like a burden."

Fenna understood immediately, and a cold smile crossed her mind. "A bait weight."

"A bait weight," Klirr confirmed. "And if someone goes to the ring to sabotage it, they think they're sabotaging the test. In reality, they're sabotaging our bait."

Brann snorted. "Then we can catch him."

"Or at least see it," said Fenna.

Niklas nodded. "Do it."

The hangar crew began removing the test weights. Slowly, carefully. Fenna watched the strap eyelet as if it were about to speak.

And while she watched, she suddenly felt this unpleasant sensation in the back of her neck.

Not because someone was standing directly behind her.

But because somewhere in the hangar there was a look that knew exactly how she stood.

Fenna raised her head slowly.

A figure stood at the top of the catwalk, in the shadows.

Not Malrik. Too small. Too narrow.



A young elf pretended to be there by chance. But nobody is up there by chance when Santa Claus, Klirr, Brann, Alva, and Fenna are down below watching a load test.

The young elf looked down at them.

And then, as if he realized Fenna was watching him, he raised two fingers to his forehead.

A small, almost mocking greeting.

And disappeared.

Fenna felt her heart beat faster.

That was no coincidence.

That was a message.

And she was clear: We see you too.

## The Star Compass

The young elf on the catwalk had disappeared, but his greeting still hung in the hangar, as if he had hung it on a nail.

Fenna had kept her gaze fixed on the sky for too long, and she was annoyed with herself for it. Not because it was unprofessional, but because it was precisely what she didn't want: to react. Malrik and his shadows thrived on others reacting. Reaction was their sustenance. And Fenna didn't like being prey.

"Who was that?" asked Tilo, and you could hear that he didn't want the answer at all.

"Someone who considers himself inconspicuous," said Klirr.

"And was he?" Brann asked.

Klirr pulled a face that she passed for a smile. "Only for people who aren't looking."

Alva stared at the catwalk. "This is new," she murmured. "Malrik used to play alone."

"Or we just didn't see it," said Fenna.

Niklas nodded. "If someone remains unnoticed for long enough, they eventually believe they are invisible. Then they become generous. They share."

"He shares sabotage," Tilo said.

“He delegates tasks,” Klirr corrected. “And that means: He builds structure. Structure means: You can map it.”

Fenna felt the word click inside her. Mapping. That was it. Malrik's strength was movement. Her strength had to be orientation.

Brann was placing the cassette on a workbench when Fenna suddenly realized that this cassette wasn't just bait. It was a focal point. Everything revolved around samples, dust, fragments, labels. Everything was reactive.

And if you are reactive, the opponent dictates the pace.

“We need something that lies in front of us,” Fenna said.

Klirr looked at her. “Say it.”

Fenna exhaled. “We need to know where he can go next before he gets there.”

Tilo immediately raised his hand, as if it were a lesson. “So... something like... a map of his routes.”

“Yes,” said Fenna. “But not just a plan. A... compass.”

Brann snorted. “A compass at the North Pole is funny. It always just says: ‘Good luck.’”

Alva remained silent, then she said: “The star compass.”

Everyone was looking at her.

Fenna blinked. “What?”

Alva looked at Niklas. “Will you tell me, or should I?”

Niklas paused briefly. Then he nodded slowly, as if accepting that some things that had been kept under wraps now needed to be brought back into the light.

“The star compass was an old tool,” said Niklas. “Not for outdoors. For indoors.”

“Inside?” Tilo repeated. “How do you navigate inside? You just walk...”

“Until you go the wrong way,” said Klirr.

Niklas looked at Fenna. “The star compass doesn't show directions. It shows... rivers.”

“Which rivers?” asked Fenna.

“The invisible ones,” Alva said. “The paths that magic and work take. The routes that favor things when no one forces them to go any other way.”

Brann grimaced. “That sounds like mysticism.”

“That sounds like physics,” Fenna said, and she felt she meant it. “Every place has flows. Flows of people. Flows of supplies. Energy. If you see the flows, you can see where someone can create a disturbance to make it spread.”

Klirr nodded. "And Malrik turns disturbances into streams."

Niklas went to the workbench and opened a drawer that seemed so deep it could hold a small winter sleeping inside. He didn't take anything out. He just stared inside, as if trying to remember where something was that he hadn't wanted to touch for years.

"The star compass is no longer in the hangar," he said quietly.

"Where then?" asked Fenna.

Niklas closed the drawer. "Under the workshop floor. In the old cupboard. Where you put things you don't need anymore – until you suddenly need them again."

Klirr immediately said: "We'll get him."

“We?” Tilo asked, and in his tone there was a quiet hope that “we” did not include him.

Klirr looked at him. "You."

Tilo froze. "Me?"

"You're fast," said Klirr.

“I’m... nervous,” Tilo corrected.

"Nervous people are fast," said Klirr. "Fenna too. Alva stays with Niklas. Brann stays at the core. I'll come later when it's safe here."

Niklas raised a hand. “Clink...”

Klirr looked at him. "You don't want us to split up."

“No,” said Niklas. “I don’t want us to remain blind.”

That wasn't a contradiction. It was agreement that hurts.

Fenna reached for her suitcase. "Then we'll go."

Tilo shrugged as if trying to hide in his shoulders. "Under the workshop floor... that sounds like..."

“Like dust,” Fenna said.

“Looking for things that crawl,” said Tilo.

“According to truth,” said Fenna, and she didn’t know whether to find that reassuring or frightening.

They set off, out through the hangar, into the corridors, which were now less crowded. Night work meant: fewer elves, more shadows, more noises that couldn't be immediately explained.

"Why did they put the compass away?" Tilo asked on the way.

Fenna thought for a moment. Then she said, "Because he showed too much."

Tilo looked at her. "Too much?"

"Some people don't want to see where the currents flow," Fenna said. "Because then they would have to see where they can be manipulated."

Tilo swallowed. "So... right now."

They reached an old maintenance door that led into a narrow passage running beneath the workshop. The passage was lower, colder, and the light here was not festive but functional: a row of pale lamps that looked as if they had never learned to twinkle.

Fenna pushed open the door. A draft of air met them, carrying the scent of dust and old wood.

Tilo hesitated.

"Come," said Fenna.

"I'm coming," said Tilo, and his voice sounded like someone who was making a very bad decision and yet was proud of it.

They met their end.

And somewhere above them, in the glittering light show, the display continued as if nothing were wrong.

But Fenna knew: There were more than just pipes and cables under the ground.

Beneath the ground lie stories that no one wanted to tell anymore.

Beneath the workshop floor, the world was different. Not magically different—not in the pretty way where you find glitter in the dust and think, "Oh, how lovely, even the dirt is festive here." No, it was different in the way old houses are: you sense that things happen down there when no one is looking upstairs.

The corridor was narrow enough that Tilo unconsciously hunched his shoulders, as if that would make him sound less. The lamps cast pale circles on the floor, and between these circles lay shadows that felt like water. Not because they were wet, but because they could flow if you ignored them.

Fenna went ahead. She didn't hold the lamp high, but rather so that the light grazed the ground. Flat light is honest. It reveals edges. It shows traces. It shows dust that isn't where it should be.

Tilo trailed behind her, and every time his boot crunched on a loose pebble, he flinched as if he had just woken a reindeer.

"Breathe," Fenna whispered again.

"I'm breathing," Tilo whispered.

"Not like you're hiding someone in your throat."

"I'm not hiding anyone!"

"Then stop pretending you are."

Tilo mumbled something unintelligible, presumably a complaint to the world. The world ignored it.

Cables ran along the wall, thick, old, with insulation that had seen better days. Down here, you could see how often the system had been patched up. Not because it was broken, but because it was alive. Living systems get patched up. And patches are either a sign of care or of need.

"Someone has been working here recently," Fenna said suddenly.

Tilo stopped. "Where?"

Fenna shone her light on a spot on the ground where dust was missing. Not much. Just a narrow strip, as if someone had dragged something heavy there or deliberately placed their footsteps there.

"Dust is like snow," said Fenna. "It remembers who walks over it."

Tilo leaned forward, shuddering. "And who walked over it?"

Fenna pointed to a small mark. A tiny pattern, barely visible: an imprint with a notch in profile. Not accidental. That notch again.

Tilo whispered: "This is..."

"It's a pattern," Fenna said. "And he's doing it everywhere."

They continued deeper, until the passage widened at one point. There stood old crates, shelves, a dusty workbench, and a cupboard in the corner.

The wardrobe looked as if it had once held significance. Not because it was large or beautiful, but because it was solid. Thick wood, a heavy door, a lock that wasn't decorative, but meant to be used for real.

"The cupboard," Tilo murmured.

Fenna nodded. "The closet."

She stopped in front of it. Her pulse was calm. That surprised her. Perhaps she had grown accustomed to the feeling that everything down here was a little too quiet.

"Do you have a key?" Tilo asked.

Fenna shook her head. "Niklas said it's in the old cupboard. Not how to open it."

Tilo looked at the castle. "Maybe it's... unlocked?"

Fenna looked at him, and in her gaze was: You're cute, but no.

She knelt down and shone her light on the lock. It was old, but well-maintained. Someone had oiled it. Not a hundred years ago. Recently. The keyway was clean.

"Someone is using that," Fenna said.

Tilo swallowed. "Who uses a cupboard under the floor?"

Fenna slowly stood up. "Someone who wants to hide things. Or someone who wants to get things without being seen."

Tilo made a small movement, as if he longed to go back upstairs. Fenna couldn't blame him. The ground beneath the ground is not a place one likes to linger.

"What now?" asked Tilo.

Fenna opened her suitcase. She didn't take out a crowbar. She took out something smaller: a thin metal card, a tool from her time working in precision mechanics before she was transferred to the hangar team. A tool for opening covers without leaving a trace.

"That's a break-in," Tilo whispered.

"This is an inspection," Fenna whispered.

"But..."

"When a cabinet is oiled underneath, it is no longer just a piece of furniture. It is a statement."

Tilo stared at her as if he had to get used to this new world order.

Fenna placed the metal card against the edge of the cabinet door, not the lock. She carefully slid it into the gap, feeling the tension. A cabinet is like a sled: it tells you whether it will give way or not.

Nothing.

She withdrew the card, and the light returned. The lock was solid. Not a crack. Not a weakness.

"We need a key," Fenna said.

Tilo breathed a sigh of relief, so relieved that he almost let out a small laugh – and then froze, realizing: "Key" doesn't mean "problem solved." "Key" means "Who has it?"

Fenna looked at the cupboard. "And someone has used it."

"Master Riegel?" whispered Tilo.

"Maybe," said Fenna. "Or..."

She didn't need to finish the sentence. They both knew which name crept into their minds like a cold wind.

Malrik.

Fenna sat down on her heels and thought. Klirr would say: Don't run. Pattern.

"The cupboard is oiled," she murmured. "So it's been used. But nobody talks about it. That means it's not official. So it's either..."

"...forbidden," Tilo whispered.

"Or forget," said Fenna.

"Forgetting sounds less bad," said Tilo.

"At the North Pole, sometimes being forgotten is worse than being forbidden," said Fenna, "because being forbidden means: someone has looked."

She looked around. The room was full of old stuff. Boxes that no one needed anymore. Tools so old they rusted with pride. A shelf holding old stencils.

Stencils.

Fenna stepped up to the shelf and pulled out a stencil. It was made of metal, thin, with cut-out star shapes. There were markings along the edge – tiny dots that you only see if you're looking for them.

Fenna held them up to the light. Some of the dots were... wrong. Not broken. Not accidental. Misplaced. Like a mirror.

"That can't be true," whispered Fenna.

Tilo came closer. "What?"

Fenna pointed at the dots. "Star dots. The same principle as with the labels. Only old. Very old."

Tilo stared. "Does that mean... this existed before?"

Fenna nodded slowly. "Someone was already manipulating the currents back then. Maybe not as much as today. But... it's the same pattern."

Tilo whispered: "Malrik?"

"Or someone who showed him how," Fenna said.

She put the stencil back as if it had suddenly become poisonous. Her mind was racing. If the cabinet contained the star compass, then the compass is a tool that makes these currents visible. And if Malrik is sabotaging currents, then the compass would be the last thing he wants to give them.

So he had locked him away.

Or someone else had locked him away to prevent exactly that: for anyone to see him.

"We need to inform Klirr," said Fenna.

Tilo nodded immediately. "Yes. Yes! Up! Now!"

Fenna wanted to agree, wanted to turn around, wanted to take the steps back and have air again that smells of glitter.

And then she heard it.

Not a single bell.

A soft scratching sound.

From somewhere in the corridor behind them.

Like a shoe on dust.

Like a tool hitting metal.

Fenna froze.

Tilo also froze, which is rare for him because he usually trembles. But now it was this trembling stillness that said: Someone is there.

Fenna switched off the lamp.

In the dark, you could hear more. You could hear breathing. You could hear someone pause briefly. You could hear someone considering whether to continue or not.

Tilo whispered, almost without a voice: "Are we... alone?"

Fenna did not reply.

She slowly pulled Tilo behind the shelf, so quietly that even dust would hardly have noticed. She held the suitcase tightly, as if it could protect her.

The scratching was getting closer.



One step.

Another one.

And then, in the darkness, Fenna saw a shadow at the corner.

No major movements. No dramatic appearance.

Just a figure standing there, as if it had known for a long time that Fenna was here.

And then, very quietly, a voice that was not Malrik, but had learned just as well how to set words like splinters:

"Fenna Funkel."

When a voice says your name, deep underground, in a passage that smells of dust and forgotten winters, there are two ways to react.

The first is to pretend you haven't heard anything, hoping that reality will be polite enough to be impressed.

The second is to become very calm inside, because you know that politeness exists at the North Pole, but not in mine shafts.

Fenna remained standing behind the shelf, the lamp off, clutching the suitcase tightly. Beside her, Tilo pressed his back against the wooden edge, as if he could thereby transform himself into a piece of furniture. Furniture is rarely spoken to. Furniture is ignored. Tilo considered this a life strategy.

"Fenna Funkel," the voice repeated, more quietly this time, almost friendly. Almost friendly was worse than unfriendly. Unfriendly is honest. Almost friendly is like a knife saying: I only want to cut, not hurt.

Fenna was breathing so shallowly that it was barely audible, and whispered to Tilo: "Don't move."

Tilo immediately moved a little. Not intentionally. His body simply felt that "not moving" was a challenge that had to be tested at least once.

The shadow in the corner paused. Then something clicked. A small lamp switched on, dimly, like you would turn on a pantry light when you don't want the rest of the house to realize you're searching for cookies at night.

The light fell across the corridor, grazed the shelf, and did not quite reach Fenna – but it was enough for Fenna to see the outline of the figure.

Small. Narrow. Too young for the kind of calm with which she moved.

The young elf took a step forward, so that the light partially illuminated his face. He had the kind of face you often see in factory halls: too smooth, too little sawdust, too little genuine

weariness. And in his eyes was that affected alertness of someone who feels important because he works for someone more important.

"You don't have to pretend you're not there," he said.

Fenna remained silent.

"You have a lamp," he continued. "You have..." He tilted his head as if listening. "...breathing. Very quiet breathing, but still. And you, Tilo, are breathing as if you're about to sneeze."

Tilo froze completely. You could practically see him decide to stop breathing altogether from now until Christmas was over.

Fenna slowly stepped out of cover without switching on her lamp. The darkness was her friend. Light was a traitor.

"Who are you?" she asked.

The young elf smiled narrowly. "Someone who knows what you're looking for."

"I'm looking for many things," said Fenna.

"Of course," he said. "You're looking for patterns. You're looking for fragments. You're looking for reasons not to sleep at night."

Fenna felt a faint, cold tingling sensation. Not fear. More like the kind of annoyance you get when someone acts as if they have the right to know you.

"And you're looking for... what?" asked Fenna.

He lifted the small lamp slightly. "I'm looking for you to go back upstairs."

"Why?" Fenna kept her voice calm, but her mind was already working like a clockwork mechanism with too many gears.

"Because you'll find things down there that you won't like," he said.

"There are many things I don't like," said Fenna. "For example, people who say names in the dark."

The boy laughed softly. "You're brave. Or you're pretending."

"And you're too self-confident," said Fenna. "That makes you... loud."

He tilted his head. "I'm not loud."

"Yes," said Fenna. "You come down here thinking you control the room. It's loud."

The young elf took a step closer. The light from his lamp was now close enough for Fenna to see his boots. And on the tread of one boot: a small notch.

Fenna felt a piece of the puzzle click into place inside her.

"You were up on the catwalk," she said.

He raised his eyebrows, almost proudly. "You saw me."

"You wanted to be seen," Fenna said.

The boy smiled. "Maybe."

Tilo found his voice again. "Why?"

The young elf looked at Tilo as if Tilo were a surprisingly talkative character. "Because you should understand that you can be seen too."

Fenna noticed something on his hip: a bunch of keys. Not large. Not heavy. Just a few keys – and one strikingly old, wide key that didn't look like modern workshop metalwork, but like something that had already opened a lot of wood and a lot of silence.

Fenna remained outwardly calm, but inwardly she became very quiet.

The cupboard.

"You have the key," said Fenna.

He followed her gaze, and his smile became a touch sharper. "Oh, him?"

"Yes, him."

"He's just..." He shrugged. "...for things that need to be secure."

"Safe from whom?" asked Fenna.

"In front of people who don't know when to stop searching," he said.

Fenna took a small step to the left, slightly shielding Tilo. She didn't want the boy to see him directly. Not because Tilo was important—yes, Tilo was important—but because Tilo was an emotional vulnerability that could be exploited. Tilo was like a cracked glass. You only had to look at him askance, and he would make a sound.

"What's your name?" asked Fenna.

The young team hesitated a bit too long. "That's unimportant."

"Then I'll call you 'Boot Notch Heir'," said Fenna.

Tilo made a noise that was almost a laugh, which then turned into a cough.

The boy narrowed his eyes. "You shouldn't be funny."

“There are many things I shouldn’t do,” Fenna said. “But tonight, none of us are in a position to tell the world what to do.”

He moved even closer. His lamp was now positioned so that it shone directly in Fenna's face. He didn't do it brutally. He did it casually, like someone who believes that's a normal way to exert control.

"You are leaving now," he said.

“No,” said Fenna.

“Yes,” said the boy, and this time it no longer sounded almost friendly. Now it sounded like a child who had learned that with the right tone of voice, one can frighten adults.

Fenna saw the key ring again. The wide key swung slightly as he breathed.

She needed it. She needed the compass. Without a compass, they were always one step behind Malrik.

And Malrik won with one step.

“Listen,” said Fenna, raising both hands slightly, one still on the suitcase. “If you force us to leave, we will still come back.”

"Then I'll come back," said the boy.

“And if you give us the key now,” said Fenna, “then you can claim you lost it. You can say we took it from you. You can play the victim. People like that.”

The boy laughed briefly. "Is that your idea of negotiation?"

“That’s my idea of reality,” Fenna said. “You’re not the boss. You’re just the one holding the lamp.”

His face hardened. "I'm holding more than one lamp."

"You are holding a key," Fenna said.

He took a small step, and Fenna knew: Now comes the grab for the suitcase. Now comes the moment when he tries to grab her, because he believes physical closeness makes him more powerful.

Fenna was faster.

Not faster with strength. Faster with what she had.

She pulled the thin metal card out of the case – the tool she had just used to try to persuade the cupboard door – and flicked it against the small lamp.

Not strong. Just precise.

The lamp tilted, the light swung, the boy blinked reflexively, and in the tiny moment when his eyes protected themselves, Tilo did something completely unexpected.

He jumped forward – not heroically, more in a panic – and ripped an old stencil from the shelf.

"Take that!" squealed Tilo and threw it.

The stencil sailed through the air like a star that had decided to fly in protest, crashed into the wall, and clattered so loudly that the whole disaster will probably include the sound in its memoirs.

The boy flinched, and Fenna took advantage of the sudden movement. She stepped forward, not towards him, but past him, and pressed her inspection tag against his sleeve as she passed.

A gentle pressure. An imprint. A silent sign.

The boy reached for Fenna – too late. His fingers only grazed the suitcase handle, and in doing so, he unconsciously tugged on his key ring.

A key came loose.

The wide one.

He didn't fall loudly. He fell into dust. But Fenna heard him anyway, because Fenna was by then the kind of elf who hears things others don't want to hear.

The boy noticed it too.

His gaze went downwards.

Fenna was faster. She bent down, grabbed the key, and put it in her pocket as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Hey!" the boy hissed.

"You have lost him," said Fenna.

Tilo gasped. "We've found him!"

"You stop!" the boy shouted, and now he was no longer in control. Now he was just a voice too loud for the shaft.

Fenna grabbed Tilo's sleeve. "Run."

"I'm running!" squealed Tilo, and indeed: he was running. In a way no one would have expected from him. Nervousness can unlock surprising muscle groups.

They ran down the corridor, away from the lamp, away from the voice, away from the moment when the boy realized he had just lost something very important.

Fenna heard footsteps behind them. Fast. Angry.

Then she heard something else: a whistle. Short. A signal.

Fenna felt her neck grow cold. The boy wasn't alone. That whistle wasn't a sound of alarm. It was a message.

The corridor curved ahead of them, and Fenna saw an old sign on the wall, half peeled off, but legible:

DOWNPATHWAYS – FOR MAINTENANCE ONLY. NO RETURN.

Tilo gasped: "No... what?"

Fenna pulled him around the corner. "We have a key now. We just need air."

Behind them, the echo of footsteps drew nearer.

And somewhere in the darkness, further ahead, Fenna heard a soft click.

As if another flap were being opened.

It's as if someone is blocking their way.

### Under the workshop floor

If a sign claims there is "no way back", then in nine out of ten cases this is an exaggeration written by someone out of frustration after getting lost in a circle.

Tonight it felt like a prophecy.

Fenna pulled Tilo around the corner, and the passage beyond seemed to narrow, as if he'd decided to embrace her—only it wasn't a friendly embrace, but the kind that leaves you counting your ribs afterward. Her footsteps echoed, too loud, too fast. The problem with downfalls is: you can't run quietly. You can only hope fast.

"What clicked?" gasped Tilo.

"A flap," Fenna gasped back, because she too wasn't made of stone, only of concentration. "Or a bolt. Or anything that means 'things are about to get unpleasant'."

"Most things here are called that!"

Fenna wanted to contradict him, but she heard it herself: ahead of them, further on, a soft scraping sound. Not from a rat. Not from a cable. From shoe soles on dust.

"There's someone else," Fenna whispered.

"Of course there's someone else," Tilo whispered. "Tonight is the night of humans... uh... elves, who always appear exactly when you don't want them to."

Fenna turned into a side passage that was lower and felt the air grow colder. Down here wasn't just dust; down here were stories that you can never truly erase. And stories make the air heavy.

She paused briefly, just for a heartbeat, to listen.

Behind them: footsteps. Quick. The young eleven who had lost his key and was now probably redefining his entire career.

In front of them: a second sound. Quieter. More controlled. Not running, more... waiting.

Fenna whispered: "We're between two."

Tilo whispered back: "I hate mathematics."

"Me too," said Fenna, "but she loves us."

She pulled the key from her pocket without looking, feeling for the blade of the old metal key. It felt cold, but that was normal. Everything down here was cold, even her thoughts.

There was another hatch in the wall, half-hidden by a bundle of pipes. Fenna didn't remember ever having been here. That was good. Unfamiliarity is sometimes protection.

"What are you doing?" Tilo whispered.

"I'm looking for a path that isn't planned," Fenna whispered.

"All paths here are unplanned!"

"Then it's perfect," said Fenna.

She tried the key. It fit. Of course it fit. Things that are old fit things that are old because they come from the same time: from the time when you couldn't just glitter away problems.

A soft click. The flap gave way.

Tilo made a noise that was somewhere between astonishment and panic. "You can really break in!"

"I really can survive," Fenna said.

She pushed open the hatch. Behind it was a narrow, sloping shaft leading upwards, like a throat into the belly of the building. A maintenance shaft. Lots of dust. A ladder whose rungs looked as if they had already supported many hesitant feet.

Fenna pointed. "Up."

"Up?" Tilo stared into the shaft. "I... I'm not very good at..."

"Now you can," said Fenna.

Behind them echoed a shout: "Stop!"

The voice was closer. The young elf had caught up. He sounded angry. He also sounded a little desperate. Desperation makes voices ugly. Fenna found that comforting. Ugly is often honest.

"Up," Fenna repeated, grabbing Tilo by the back and pushing him toward the ladder. Tilo grabbed the first rung as if it were his last chance. Then he climbed, faster than Fenna had expected.

Fenna followed.

The air was even dustier in the shaft. The dust here was fine, old, and tasted of wood that hadn't been touched in too long. Fenna climbed quietly, as quietly as possible. Every squeak of a rung felt like a betrayal.

Downstairs she heard the young elf arrive. His breathing was heavy. He was cursing. Then she heard him find the hatch.

"Damn it!" he shouted.

Fenna climbed faster. There was a hatch at the top. She felt for the latch, found it, and pushed it up. The hatch opened with difficulty, as if complaining about being needed again.

A sliver of light shone in.

Fenna pushed open the hatch and looked out.

They weren't back in the workshop. Not exactly. They were in an intermediate space, high up, near the dome supports. A narrow maintenance walkway, a metal mesh, with the lights glittering somewhere below.

"Where are we?" gasped Tilo as he crawled out.

"Above the factory," Fenna said.

"That doesn't reassure me at all!"

Fenna pulled herself up and closed the hatch again, as quietly as possible. She heard the young elf rattling the ladder below. Then a metallic clang, presumably as he struck the hatch. He was too late.

For the moment.

Fenna stood on the walkway and let her gaze drift over the dome supports. From up here, one could see paths. Walkways, stairs, railings. And shadows. Many shadows.

"We have to get away from here," Fenna whispered.



"Where to?" whispered Tilo.

Fenna looked left, then right. To the left, the walkway led to another platform. To the right, it led to a door marked "MAINTENANCE," and underneath, a half-scratched "DO NOT ENTER IF YOU ARE HAPPY."

Fenna chose the door. Happiness was sold out today anyway.

They walked cautiously, step by step. The machine hummed beneath them. From up here, the humming sounded like a distant sea. One could almost imagine it was peaceful. Almost.

"We have the key," said Tilo.

Fenna nodded. "And hopefully the compass."

"Hopefully? We haven't even—"

Fenna raised a hand. She had heard something. Not footsteps this time, but a soft knocking. Rhythmic. Like a code. Like someone knocking on metal to tell someone else: I'm here. You can come.

"There's someone there," Fenna whispered.

Tilo swallowed. "Anyone else?"

Fenna nodded slowly. "Yes. And he's not knocking by accident."

They reached the door. Fenna placed her hand on the handle.

The door handle was warm.

That was... wrong.

Warm meant: someone had just used it. Or someone was standing behind it.

Fenna held her breath. Tilo did the same, looking as if he was about to burst.

Then they heard a quiet voice from the other side of the door.

Not the young eleven.

Not Malrik.

A third voice, gentle, almost singing, as if it had a melody in its head that didn't fit the situation.

"Come on in," said the voice. "The floor is just as wrong upstairs as it is downstairs."

Fenna felt that her neck was colder than the dust.

A voice that speaks as if it were safe.

That was dangerous.

There are people – and elves – who can pick a lock as if they've never had any trouble with it. And there are those who invite a door to open as if it were a polite suggestion.

This voice was of the second type.

Fenna held her hand on the handle and felt the warmth as if it were writing on her fingers: Someone was just here. Someone is waiting. Someone wants you to come in.

"Who are you?" Fenna asked through the door.

Tilo made a noise that could be interpreted as agreement, if one was friendly.

On the other side of the door, there was a soft scraping sound, like fabric rubbing against metal. Then the voice said, "Someone who doesn't like climbing. And you? You're someone who's seen too many stairs tonight."

Fenna remained silent. Words can open doors without touching them. Fenna didn't want to be the one to open that door first.

"I don't have time for games," she finally said.

"Then there are two of us," said the voice. "I don't like games. I like... solutions."

Tilo whispered, barely audible: "That's what every villain says just before..."

Fenna gave him a brief squeeze of the arm. Silence.

"Why should we come in?" asked Fenna.

"Because you have the key," said the voice. "And because otherwise you'll be hanging up in the dome until someone finds you. And believe me: those who want to find you are faster than those who want to help you."

Fenna felt her heart beat faster. Not because she was afraid—well, okay, partly—but because the voice might be right. And sometimes, being right is more dangerous than a threat.

"How do you know I have the key?" Fenna asked.

"Because the boy is much too loud," said the voice, almost amused. "He stumbles all over the factory as if someone had taken away his favorite toy. And because I..." A short breath, then: "...always hear when someone thinks they're being quiet."

Fenna looked at Tilo. Tilo looked back and tried to move his eyes in a way that said, "I told you so." But his eyes seemed to say, "Please let us go somewhere where no voices speak from doorways."

Fenna made a decision that didn't feel good, but decisions rarely feel good when you really need them.

She pressed down the handle.

The door opened without resistance. Too easily. As if it had never been locked. Or as if someone had been holding it open from the inside.

Behind the door was a small maintenance room, barely bigger than a storage room. Old tools hung on the walls, tools that presumably no one up here wanted to use anymore. A table with a lamp. A chair. And on the table: a bowl of candy canes.

It was so absurd that Fenna briefly thought she had gotten lost and stumbled into a very special break.

An elf was standing in the room.

She wasn't young, but she wasn't old either. Her gray hair didn't look "old," but rather like "I've decided that color takes time." Her eyes were bright and alert. She wasn't wearing a workshop uniform, but a coat that looked more like she'd worn it on a journey than at work. And around her neck hung a small amulet that glittered in the lamplight: a star that didn't look festive, but rather... technical.

"Fenna Funkel," said the elf, as if greeting someone she had been waiting for for a long time.

Fenna didn't enter immediately. "Who are you?"

The elf smiled slightly. Not kindly enough to be reassuring. Not angry enough to be clear.

"I am Marei," she said. "I used to maintain the star compass."

Tilo made a noise. "There really is a star compass? I thought that was... something like..."

"...fairy tales?" Marei finished gently. "Yes. They like to say that. Then you don't have to look for them."

Fenna took a step into the room, slowly, and looked at Marei. "Why are you here?"

Marei gestured towards the chair. "Sit down. You look like you're about to touch a wall just to check if it's real."

"I'm not sitting down," said Fenna.

"Clattering," Marei murmured, as if that were a diagnosis.

"Why are you here?" Fenna repeated.

Marei raised her hands slightly. "Because someone wants to get the compass. And because you want to get it. And because I don't want the compass to fall into the wrong hands again."

"Which ones are the wrong ones?" asked Fenna.

Marei glanced briefly at the door, as if eavesdropping. "Those who use it to break currents instead of reading them."

Fenna felt a cold pull in her stomach. "Malrik."

Marei didn't say the name, but her look said: Yes. And more.

"You have the key," Marei said. There was no question.

Fenna didn't take it out. She left it in her pocket. "Why should I trust you?"

Marei pointed to the candy canes. "Because I'm offering you candy canes."

"That's not an argument," said Fenna.

"Yes," said Marei. "At the North Pole, nothing is as suspicious as a gift that isn't needed to bribe someone."

Tilo whispered: "I'm still not taking any."

Fenna ignored him. "Where is the compass?"

Marei didn't point immediately. She watched Fenna as if examining the way Fenna asked questions. As if the way Fenna asked about the compass was more important than the compass itself.

"He's in the closet," Marei finally said. "Down there, where you were. And you're going to get him now."

"We're getting him now," said Fenna.

Marei nodded. "Yes. But not alone."

"With you?" Fenna kept her voice neutral, but warning signs were piling up in her head.

Marei smiled again. "With your fear," she said. "And with my knowledge."

"This is... not a team," Tilo muttered.

"That's exactly the team we need tonight," Marei said. Then she stepped closer, and Fenna noticed how quietly Marei could move. Quieter than a clatter. It was an art that didn't come from discipline, but from practice in disappearing.

Marei leaned towards the table, lifted the star amulet slightly, and Fenna saw that it wasn't just jewelry. It was a small device, finely crafted, with tiny lines and dots. Like a code. Like a map.

"This is part of the compass," Marei said. "Or rather: its key. Not made of metal. Made of alignment."

Fenna felt her curiosity clash with her caution. Part of her wanted to ask immediately. The other part screamed: This is exactly the moment when people get tangled up.

"Why did you have it?" asked Fenna.

Marei lowered the amulet again. "Because I saved it back then, when they locked away the compass. Because I knew that you don't lock tools away in dark cupboards if they're just tools."

"Who locked him away?" asked Fenna.

Marei exhaled. "Not Niklas. Not Klirr. Not you. It was... a decision. A round of discussions. A consensus. And Alva was there."

Fenna blinked. "Alva?"

Marei nodded. "She went along with it back then. Not because she's evil. But because she thought it was the only way to keep the peace. Sometimes you keep the peace by hiding something important. And sometimes you just keep the truth alive until it starts to rot."

Tilo whispered: "That sounds very much like a villain again..."

Marei looked at him. "You have good intuition. You should listen to it more and talk about it less."

Tilo turned red and remained silent.

Fenna felt things rearranging themselves in her mind. Alva, the compass, the wardrobe, the key, the young elf with the notch, Malrik, who keeps popping up everywhere.

"So you're... on our side?" Fenna asked.

Marei didn't smile. "I'm on the side that doesn't dissect Christmas into individual pieces."

Fenna nodded slowly. That wasn't a romantic statement. That was a practical one. And practicality was the only currency that still mattered here.

From outside, somewhere in the maintenance walkway, a metallic hammering sound was suddenly heard.

Not loud. But rhythmic.

Like someone banging against a hatch.

The young eleven had reached the top.

"He's here," Tilo whispered.

Marei put her finger to her lips. "Then we won't stay."

She went to the door, opened it a crack, and listened. Then she looked at Fenna.

"You have the key," she said softly. "I have the alignment. Now we'll take the shortcut back to the belly."

Fenna swallowed. The short journey back to her stomach sounded like a very bad idea.

But bad ideas were the only ones that worked today.

Marei didn't lead, she glided.

Fenna had seen many elves walk silently. Walking silently is a kind of basic course at the light factory, because otherwise you're constantly stepping on freshly painted stars. Marei, however, moved as if she had a pact with the shadows. She opened the door, stepped out onto the narrow maintenance walkway, and the air seemed to part for her out of courtesy.

Outside, the metallic hammering sounded closer than Fenna would have liked. Somewhere above or behind them, someone was banging on a hatch or a railing with the childish defiance of someone who had just learned that the world doesn't work according to their plan.

"Not to the left," Marei whispered, pointing to the right where the footbridge led into a narrower passage that disappeared into the semi-darkness. "That's where he's looking."

"How do you know that?" whispered Fenna.

"Because I've heard him say that before," Marei said. "And because he always thinks he's being clever by taking the obvious door."

Tilo pressed himself against the wall between them so he wouldn't be in the way, a brave decision for someone made of nerves. "I never take obvious doors," he whispered. "I only take doors that swallow me by mistake."

Marei glanced at him briefly. "That's a valuable skill."

Fenna almost laughed, but the laughter caught in her throat when the hammering abruptly stopped. Silence followed. And in that silence, something else could be heard: footsteps. Cautious footsteps. Searching footsteps.

"He's stopped hitting me," Tilo whispered in a panic. "That's worse than hitting me."

"Yes," said Fenna.

Marei raised her hand, waited a heartbeat, and then slid aside an inconspicuous metal plate set in the wall. Behind it was no dramatic secret door with cobwebs and a sign reading "For the Chosen Only." Behind it was a hole. An honest, unromantic hole that smelled of dust and of decisions one later regrets.

"Here," said Marei.

Fenna shone her light inside. A narrow shaft, just wide enough that two elves couldn't coexist without arguing about philosophical questions like: Do you really have to breathe when you're squeezing through metal?

"Is this the short way?" whispered Fenna.

"Short distances are rarely comfortable," Marei whispered. "Give me the lamp."

Fenna handed it to her. Marei didn't turn it on. She just held it, as if giving her courage.

"Why is there no light?" whispered Tilo.

"Because light gives away," Fenna whispered.

"And because the dust in here glows anyway if you look at it for too long," Marei added drily. Then she slid inside, silently, without hesitation.

Fenna followed, Tilo behind. Tilo squeezed himself in so awkwardly that the shaft briefly sounded as if it were complaining. Fenna held her breath until she realized that noises in here, while dangerous, were also unavoidable. You can't be elegant when you're squeezing through the belly of a building. You can only be quick and hope the building understands.

They crawled forward, over cold metal, past cables that looked as if they were offended at still being used. Fenna felt the key in her pocket like a warm weight, even though it was cold. It was a feeling of: This is important. This is yours now.

Behind them, very muffled, Fenna suddenly heard a voice. Not close, but close enough.

"I know you're there!" cried the young elf. His words echoed off the metal, grew thin, became whispers, became dust.

Marei continued crawling as if she hadn't heard anything. Fenna followed suit. Tilo did too, and it was astonishing: when Tilo wasn't allowed to talk, he was actually faster.

After what felt like an eternity—which in reality was probably only a few dozen meters, but fear expands spaces like dough—they reached a grate. Marei carefully pushed it open. Behind it: the familiar abyss beneath the workshop floor, the room with the old cabinet.

Fenna slipped out, straightened up, and immediately felt that something had changed.

The dust was stirred up.

Not everywhere. Only in one lane. One lane that led from the corridor to the room where the wardrobe stood.

"He was here," Tilo whispered, and his voice was finally really quiet, because even his nervous system understood that this was not a moment for theatrics.

Marei nodded. "Of course."

Fenna pulled out the key, stepped up to the cupboard, and paused for a moment. She wasn't sure if she was walking into a trap. But then she thought about the labels. The backup line. What "wrong" means when it starts happening everywhere.

"Do it," whispered Marei. "Quickly."

Fenna tried to insert the key. The lock accepted it like a long-lost friend, which is always a bad sign, because locks shouldn't have friends.

A satisfying click.

The cupboard door opened.

Inside wasn't a gleaming artifact laid on velvet, as in stories. Inside lay a dark wooden box, containing something that at first glance looked like a broken star made of metal struts. Thin arms, delicate joints, small engraved lines. And in the center, a round glass, milky, as if it had acquired a veil over the years to prevent anyone from seeing too closely.

Marei stepped closer, and for the first time Fenna saw something like emotion in her face. Not joy. More like... relief that didn't dare to show itself.

"There you are," Marei whispered, and it sounded as if she were speaking to an old tool that she respected.

Fenna carefully lifted the object. It was heavier than it looked. Not just because of the metal and glass. Because of its significance.

"And now?" Tilo whispered. "Will it show us Malrik? Will it show us... Christmas? Will it show us... the meaning of life?"

"It shows currents," said Marei. "And currents show you where someone is kicking against them."

Fenna held the compass in both hands. "How does it work?"

Marei pointed to her star amulet. "It needs alignment. Without it, it's just a pretty object that you lock away in cupboards because you're afraid it might be right."

She removed the amulet from the chain and placed it in a small slot on the edge of the compass. It fit so perfectly that Fenna knew immediately: This isn't a spontaneous idea. This is a system.

Marei turned the amulet slightly.

The glass in the middle clouded briefly, as if taking a deep breath. Then it became clearer – not clear like window glass, but clear like ice that has decided to be transparent.

And then, very slowly, something began to move inside the glass.

Not a single arrow.

Something like a whisper. Like fine wisps of mist, drifting in one direction. At first it was barely visible. Then it became clearer: lines. Streams. Invisible paths that stood in the room as if they had always been there, just waiting for someone to finally look.

Tilo stared. "Holy cow..."

Fenna felt her breath catch. The compass didn't point to any cardinal direction. It showed where the work flows. Where the work is drawn. Where magic gathers. Where the paths are dense like a crowd – and where they become thin like a promise.

And then Fenna saw something that made her stomach clench.



A current that should not be flowing.

A dark, restless current, like a countercurrent pushing against everything else. It wasn't black as night. It was black as burnt resentment. And it didn't just drift anywhere, but... it wound itself around structures. Around central points.

"That's..." Fenna whispered, because loud words sounded wrong down here. "That's the soot."

Marei nodded. "Streams of soot. They're not everywhere. They're targeted."

Tilo swallowed. "Where are they going?"

Fenna followed the dark streak in the glass with her eyes. It wound like a bad thought that wouldn't let go. It led from the shafts upwards – and then, clearly, in a direction that Fenna knew immediately.

"Hangar," she said.

Marei nodded, but her eyes had narrowed. "Not just that. Look closer."

Fenna forced himself to look more closely. The dark train branched out. One branch led to the hangar. Another extended towards the workshop floor, towards the label station, towards... something farther away.

"The Heart Tree," Fenna whispered, and she didn't know where she got the word from. Perhaps from the work, from rumors, from Alva's stories, from the feeling that there's always a core one wants to reach.

Marei looked at her. "You can feel it."

"I see it," said Fenna.

At that moment, they heard a metallic scraping sound somewhere up in the shaft. A rattling. Then a dull thud against a hatch.

The young elf had followed them.

"He's fast," Tilo whispered, and his voice was once again on the verge of becoming a sound.

Fenna closed the cupboard with a brusque movement. She took out the compass, but didn't remove the amulet, because she had no time for fine motor skills or rituals.

"We have to get out," said Fenna.

"Yes," said Marei. "And we need to use that thing up there before he sends us down another shaft."

Tilo looked down the corridor as if he expected the walls to start asking questions. "Which way?"

Fenna looked at the compass. The currents flowed. The dark pull pushed. And somewhere there was a knot, a restless eddy, like a small storm just beginning to form.

“There,” said Fenna, pointing. “We’re not going back the way we came. We’re going... against the current.”

Marei smiled for the first time, very briefly. "Good. At least we'll be interesting to him then."

They ran.

Not heroic. Not elegant. Just the way you run when you're holding something in your hands that can reveal the truth, and you suddenly understand why some people prefer to lock truth away in cupboards.

There was a crash behind them. A hatch sprang open. A voice cursed.

And Fenna knew: Now that they had the star compass, the game had changed.

Now they were no longer just the ones who reacted.

Now they could see.

## The song that's not right

The star compass felt heavy in Fenna's hands, like a guilty conscience. Not because it accused her of anything, but because it revealed everything one would rather not see when convincing oneself that a place "just works".

They were no longer running through any corridor. They were running through an organism. And the compass showed them where the veins were blocked.

Marei led them from the basement down a staircase so steep it felt like a moral dilemma. Tilo huffed and puffed behind her, and with every breath Fenna, the question arose: How many times can an elf curse his own lungs in one night?

Reaching the top, the corridor spat them out into a part of the factory that smelled of paint and freshly sanded wood. The sounds were there again: hammering, whirring, the occasional clack of a stamp. And in between... music.

Not loud. Not like a concert. More like the background hum that constantly accompanies the light show. Elves sang while they worked. Sometimes because they were happy. Sometimes because singing keeps the beat. Sometimes because silence leaves too much room for thoughts.

Last night the music was... off-key.

Fenna noticed it immediately. Not from individual notes—elves aren't opera singers, and anyone expecting opera at the North Pole is in the wrong place—but from the feeling. It

sounded as if someone had loosened a tiny screw in the song. Not enough to break the song. Just enough to make you unconsciously clear your throat and think: Was that... wrong?

"Do you hear that?" whispered Fenna.

Tilo nodded so vigorously that his cap almost flew off. "It sounds like someone is trying to be cheerful but thinking about taxes at the same time."

"No taxes," Fenna said automatically, and was briefly startled at how naturally her mind followed rules.

Marei listened. "It's not just crooked," she said quietly. "It's... misaligned."

Fenna held the star compass slightly higher. In the milky glass, the currents moved across the surroundings. The bright lines flowed as usual, but in between was a dark streak that stretched not only through places, but... through moods.

"How can an electric current influence music?" Tilo whispered.

Marei looked at him as if he had asked how to make water wet. "Because music here isn't just music."

Fenna understood. At the North Pole, many things were not what they seemed. A bell was not just a bell. A sack was not just a sack. And a song was not just a melody.

"The work songs," Fenna murmured. "They keep the beat."

Marei nodded. "And the rhythm holds... the distribution. The harmony. The balance."

Tilo whispered: "If the song is wrong... then the hands are moving wrong."

"And the paths," said Fenna, "and the labels, and the time."

They followed the sound. Not because they were music fans, but because their compass showed them that the dark train was getting thicker there. Like soot accumulating in a chimney.

They entered a large hall where many elves sat at long tables. There, music boxes were being assembled—tiny wooden animals that played a song when wound up. Normally, this hall was one of the most pleasant places in the factory: little melodies everywhere, overlapping like snowflakes.

Today it sounded like a choir that couldn't decide whether to laugh or cry.

On one of the tables lay a row of music boxes, all supposed to play the same song. All of them. And yet Fenna immediately heard: One of them was wrong. Not broken. Not silent. Simply... wrong.

She stepped closer, bent over the row, and as if the work were a grumpy comedian, at that exact moment the wrong music box played its note.

It was just one note, a touch too low. It didn't make the song unrecognizable. It just made it... scratchy. Like a smile that isn't genuine.

Fenna looked at the elves at the table. They seemed tired, confused. One was rubbing his ears. An elf held a music box to her ear, as if hoping it could explain what was going on.

"Who supplied the reeds?" asked Fenna.

The elf looked up as if Fenna had just asked who had turned on the sun. "They... they come from the camp. Standard."

"And who was in the camp?" asked Fenna.

The elf shrugged. "Many. Always many."

Marei stepped next to Fenna and looked around. Her eyes wandered over shelves, boxes, and tools. Then her gaze lingered on something that Fenna had initially perceived as mere decoration.

A small wind chime made of metal stars hung in a corner. Normally a harmless thing, just there to make the breezes audible. Today it didn't chime clearly. It chimed... dully.

Marei went over without hesitation. She didn't touch the wind chime; she simply held the lamp so that the light swept across the stars.

One star was blacker than the others. Not visibly black. Not like soot. More like: light doesn't stick.

"Resentment," whispered Marei.

Fenna felt everything inside her tighten. "He mixes it into the music."

"He mixes it into the beat," Marei said. "And if the beat is wrong, then—"

"—then everything will go wrong," Tilo whispered.

The elves at the table looked at her. You could see the word "false" settling like coldness across their faces. They weren't cowards. But they were workers who suddenly realized their tools were lying.

Fenna raised her hands. "Nobody is to blame," she said quickly, because she felt the blame immediately start to spread throughout the room. "This is... from the outside."

One elf laughed bitterly. "From the outside? We're at the North Pole. What's outside here? The wind?"

"Sometimes wind is enough," Tilo murmured.

Marei looked at Fenna. "We have to find the source."

Fenna looked at the compass. The dark line was dense here, but it wasn't at its source. It flowed on. It stretched through the hall, outwards, towards... the camp.

"The camp," said Fenna.

Marei nodded. "And someone there makes sure that the wrong parts fall into the right hands."

Fenna felt a twinge in her stomach. Storage meant supplies. Supplies meant opportunities. And opportunities were exactly what Malrik loved to poison.

She turned to the elf with the music box. "Lock the table. No more music boxes. All those made today: put them in boxes. Mark them. We'll be back."

The elf nodded, grateful to have a clear task again. Elves love clear tasks because clear tasks don't require thinking.

Fenna turned around. "We're leaving."

"I'm coming," Tilo said immediately, and his voice sounded as if he were proud that he could still speak.

Marei pulled her coat tighter. "Quickly," she said.

And as they left the hall, Fenna heard the wrong music box playing again behind her.

Just one note. Too low.

But the note sounded as if it were happy to be wrong.

The storage area in the Lichterwerk was not a single room. It was an idea that was broken down into many rooms because the idea was too big to fit into one door.

There was the fabric storeroom, where threads and felt lay so neatly that it almost made you sad. There was the wood storeroom, smelling of fresh sawdust and the promise that someday stories would emerge from the planks. There was the metal storeroom, which always sounded a bit like it was discussing its own hardness.

And then there was the warehouse that is rarely mentioned aloud: the warehouse for "special parts".

Special parts are anything that officially exists but unofficially causes problems. Parts that are only needed once a year. Parts that aren't assigned to a category. Parts that "shouldn't really be thrown away because you never know." Special parts are the drawer of a place. And the drawer of a place is always dangerous because it contains the things that no one sorts.

The star compass led them there.

Fenna held it in front of her, and the currents in the glass moved like fine threads. The bright network was everywhere, but the dark pull grew stronger the closer they got to the special parts. It almost vibrated, as if it were hungry.

"I don't like that," Tilo whispered.

"That's good," said Fenna. "If you like it, you're part of the problem."

Marei walked beside her, her eyes alert, her coat a whisper. "He's not just moving labels and wires," she murmured. "He's shifting the foundation. He's reaching for things that others consider safe."

"Like songs," said Fenna.

"Like habits," Marei said.

The door to the special parts warehouse was inconspicuous. No sign, just a number. That's precisely what made it suspicious. At the North Pole, everything is labeled, even boxes of boxes. If something isn't labeled, someone doesn't want you to find it.

Fenna put her hand on the door handle.

The doorknob was cold. Good. Cold means: nobody was here.

She opened the door.

The warehouse was smaller than expected, but crammed full. Shelves reaching to the ceiling, boxes, drawers, small compartments with tiny bags bearing cryptic abbreviations that only people who had worked in the warehouse for a long time or were just beginning to study madness understood.

A faint hum filled the air. Not mechanical. Rather... as if the room itself remembered that it was part of the artwork.

Fenna stopped and listened.

The humming was the song.

Not loud, but there. And it sounded more focused here.

"That comes from here," Tilo whispered.

Marei nodded. "Or it's being fed here."

They walked along between the shelves. Fenna held the compass so that the glass wasn't directly exposed to the light. The currents within it became clearer the deeper they went into the room. And the dark current led them like a finger pointing to a shelf at the back.

There was a box there. Nothing special. Just a box labeled: TONGUES – STANDARD.

"Standard," Fenna murmured.

"Standard is the best hiding place," said Marei.

Fenna opened the lid.

Inside lay small metal reeds, delicate, clean, in rows. Reeds are usually a little warm because they often retain residual heat from the manufacturing process. These were cold. Too cold, as if they had never been in a workshop, but in a room that knew only cold thoughts.

Fenna didn't reach inside. She only held the compass over it.

The dark streak in the glass contracted, like an animal smelling its food.

"That's it," whispered Fenna.

Tilo pressed his hand over his mouth. "That... that's just metal!"

"Metal can be less resonant than wood," Marei said. "And if you poison it, it will resonate further."

Fenna pulled her sample case, the one with the foil, out of the case and carefully opened it. She didn't want to touch the reeds directly. She just wanted to check if the soot was really on them.

She took the tweezers, grasped a tongue at the edge, and lifted it.

In the air, it appeared normal. Silvery. Clean.

But when Fenna held it up to the lamplight, she saw it: a hint of darkness at the edge. Not visible like dirt. Visible like light that refuses to be seen.

Fenna swallowed. "He pollinated her."

Marei nodded. "Or someone did it for him."

Tilo whispered: "How do you get your hands on something like that without anyone noticing?"

Fenna looked around. "Warehouse access."

Marei added: "And trust. Warehouse staff will let you in if you say you just need something quickly."

"Like Malrik," Fenna murmured.

"Or his notch," Marei said.

Fenna thought of the young elf, the key, the whistling, the second hatch. Malrik had accomplices. Accomplices with access. Accomplices who still believed they were doing something important.

Fenna closed the box lid again, as if she were locking away a curse. "We have to isolate this."

"And exchange," said Marei.

"And inform the hall," said Fenna.

Tilo nodded eagerly. "And clink! And Niklas! And... everyone!"

"Not all of them," said Fenna. "Too many ears."

Marei looked at her. "You're learning."

Fenna felt her nerves now aglow, not just fear. The compass showed them the dark train. They could track it now. They could understand how Malrik worked: small things that tipped over big ones.

"Where does it lead next?" asked Fenna.

Marei pointed at the glass. "You're the one holding it."

Fenna stared inside. The dark train wasn't just heading towards that crate. It branched out. One branch led back towards the music hall. Another... another continued on, deeper into the warehouse, towards a corner Fenna hadn't yet entered.

There stood a shelf with wooden boxes labeled in chalk: GLOSSY POWDER. STARDUST. SNOW SHIMMER.

"Oh no," Tilo whispered.

Fenna followed the line. It didn't end at the glittering powders. It ended at a box that stood lower down, half in shadow, labeled with a word that immediately made Fenna's mouth go dry:

SONG CORE.

"What are song cores?" Tilo whispered.

Marei fell very quiet. Then she said: "These are the small pieces that keep the beat in the factory hall chants. The ones that are built into the large bells and the workshop metronomes. So that everything... stays together."

Fenna looked at the box as if she were about to jump up and bite it. "If they're poisoned..."

"Then the whole song will be wrong," said Marei.

Tilo swallowed. "And what if the whole song is wrong..."

Fenna nodded. "Then the whole system is working incorrectly. Without you even realizing it."

A long moment in which only the humming of the song could be heard. A humming that now sounded like mockery.

Fenna went to the box, very slowly, and placed her hand on the lid.

The lid was warm.

Tilo whispered, almost tonelessly: "Someone was just here."



Marei looked towards the door. "Or someone else is here."

The next moment they heard a soft rustling behind the shelf. Fabric. Footsteps. A breath that was too close.

Fenna pulled her hand from the lid, lifted the compass, and the currents in the glass flickered briefly, as if the work itself had held its breath.

Then a voice came from the shadows.

A laugh, quiet, like a knife stroking wood.

"So you can hear it too," said the voice.

And Fenna knew immediately: That was Malrik.

Malrik's voice had this strange quality of making the room seem smaller.

Not because he was loud. Quite the opposite. He was quiet, and that's precisely what made it so uncomfortable. Quiet voices compel you to get closer. And getting closer is often the first thing you regret.

Fenna didn't turn around abruptly. Sudden turns are for people who want to be surprised. Fenna turned slowly, so that her lamp could illuminate the shadowed area without looking like a torch.

Malrik stood between two shelves, as if he'd grown there. His beard—that splintered beard that gave him his name—didn't look like a funny quirk today, but rather like something you grow to scratch the surface of the world. His hands were clean. Of course they were. Malrik was always clean when others were covered in dirt.

"You shouldn't be here," Fenna said.

Malrik shrugged, slightly. "And yet here I am."

"That's the problem," Tilo whispered before he could stop it.

Malrik glanced at Tilo. His gaze lingered for a moment, like a finger checking if a spot is soft. "Oh," he said, "you're here too. How nice."

Tilo turned pale. Fenna felt anger stirring within her, not hot, more like cold. Malrik belittled people. That was his favorite job.

Marei took a step forward. "Malrik."

Malrik looked at her, and for the first time in that room, his face changed ever so slightly. Not much. A tiny twitch at the corners of his eyes. Surprise, perhaps. Or anger. Or both, all tangled up together.

"Marei," he said. "The old compass whisperer. I thought you'd be somewhere long ago where you wouldn't get in anyone's way anymore."

Marei didn't smile. "I always get in the way when someone thinks they are a way."

Malrik laughed softly. "Beautiful words. But words are like songs: they only sound good as long as someone sings them."

Fenna gripped the star compass tighter. She felt the glass vibrate slightly, as if it disliked Malrik's presence. Or as if it particularly liked her – and that would be worse.

"You have pollinated the song seeds," said Fenna.

Malrik stepped closer, not too close, but close enough for Fenna to catch the scent of cold metal and... something ashy. Not really. More of an imaginary thought.

"Dusted," Malrik repeated, amused. "As if this were a bakery."

"That's enough," said Fenna.

"It's always enough," said Malrik. "That's the beauty of it. You don't have to do much at all. You just have to find the right point. The right tone. The right little mistake that becomes too big if everyone ignores it."

Marei looked at the box. "You poisoned the song."

Malrik inclined his head. "Poisoning is so dramatic. I just did it... honestly."

Fenna felt her fingers tighten around the compass. "Really?"

Malrik smiled thinly. "Yes. This work sings songs all the time so it doesn't hear how tired it is. So it doesn't hear how much pressure is on everything. The song is a band-aid. I'm just peeling the band-aid off."

Tilo whispered: "That's sick."

Malrik looked at him again. "No. That's clear."

Fenna took a step towards the box of song seeds. Malrik raised his hand slightly. Not threateningly, more like someone saying: You have to earn this.

"I wouldn't touch that," he said.

"Why?" asked Fenna.

"Because it's faster otherwise," Malrik said kindly. "And you do want time, don't you? You've all become so... time-conscious."

Marei whispered to Fenna: "He wants you to touch it."

Fenna nodded slightly. Yes. Malrik wanted exactly that. He wanted an action that would later feel like a mistake. A fingerprint. A moment he could hold against her if the song's core elements failed.

“You’re in our way,” Fenna said, noticing her voice was getting harsher. “We’re taking the crate. We’re locking it. End of story.”

Malrik sighed, as if Fenna were a child who didn't get the punchline. "You really think this is the end?"

“No,” said Fenna. “I think this is the beginning of your end.”

Malrik's eyes flashed briefly. "Ah. There it is. Courage. I like courage. Courage burns so beautifully."

A soft clicking sound was suddenly heard behind Fenna.

Not off the shelf.

Out the door.

Someone had closed the storage room door.

Fenna turned her head slightly, just enough to see it: the young elf. Boot notch. He stood by the door, his hand on the bolt, his face tense, his eyes angry.

“You!” Tilo shouted.

The boy glared at Fenna. "Give back the key."

Malrik raised a hand without turning around. "Later."

The boy froze, as if he'd just been reminded that he wasn't the main character. His lips pressed together. But he held onto the bar, as if to prove to himself that he was important after all.

Fenna felt the room close in. Malrik stood before them. The boy was at the door. Shelves, boxes, drawers – all things behind which someone else could be hiding if Malrik really liked to exaggerate.

Marei whispered: "We mustn't let him talk here. He's wasting time."

"And what do we do?" whispered Tilo.

Fenna looked at the compass. In the glass, the dark current was wild. It swirled around Malrik like smoke around a candle. And there—between the currents—Fenna saw a bright line leading in a direction that wasn't the door.

A back side. A maintenance walkway. A path not intended for warehouse workers.

"There," whispered Fenna.

Marei followed her gaze and nodded immediately. "Good."

Fenna raised the lamp, this time not to illuminate, but to dazzle. She directed the light straight into Malrik's face.

Not for long. Just briefly. Just enough for him to blink.

"Now!" hissed Fenna.

Tilo, who wasn't really built for heroism, did something unexpected again: He grabbed the bowl of candy canes from the table – the bowl Marei had mentioned earlier – and hurled it towards the young elf at the door.

Candy canes are hard. Candy canes are surprisingly fast. And they hit with a sound that sounds like someone insulting a holiday decoration.

The boy threw his arms up reflexively to protect his face. The bolt on the door rattled. For a heartbeat, the door was no longer fully secured.

Malrik blinked again, and at that moment Marei grabbed the box of song seeds.

"Don't touch it!" Malrik snarled.

"Too late," said Marei, and her voice sounded like someone who knows exactly which gloves she is wearing.

Fenna grabbed Tilo by the sleeve. "Run!"

They didn't run to the door.

They ran towards the back path.

Between the shelves, past boxes that screamed "GLOSSY POWDER" and drawers that whispered "SNOW SHIMMER," they reached a narrow maintenance hatch. Fenna flung it open, feeling cold air behind it.

They jumped in.

Behind them they heard Malrik's voice, no longer friendly, but sharp:

"Leave them alone."

The sentence was directed at the boy, not at her.

And that was almost worse, because it showed that Malrik had factored all of this in.

They slid into the maintenance corridor, the hatch closed behind them.

In the darkness, Fenna could hear her own breathing. Marei held the box tightly. Tilo gasped and whispered, "I... I just... used candy canes as weapons."

"You were great," Fenna whispered.

"I'm... sticky," Tilo whispered.

They heard footsteps behind the flap. Malrik didn't follow. Not immediately.

That was a bad sign.

Because Malrik isn't running.

Malrik is planning.

And somewhere, in this false song that seeped through the work, Fenna heard a note that suddenly became even deeper.

It's as if the work itself is realizing that it's about to stumble.

## Scapegoat

The maintenance corridor smelled of cold metal and the kind of dust that no longer feels like dirt, but like a historical document. Fenna shuffled forward, her lamp only half-lit so she wouldn't look like a wandering lighthouse. Marei carried the box of song seeds as if it were a sleeping animal that mustn't be disturbed. Tilo was actually a bit sticky—candy canes are nature's gift to people who think they need to hold on to things—and cursed under his breath because apparently, even in a panic, you can still be proud.

"He let us go," Fenna whispered.

Marei nodded without speaking.

Tilo whispered: "Maybe... he has respect for candy canes?"

"He respects time," Fenna said. "And he has decided that we are not worth his time right now. That means he is doing something else."

"Something worse," Tilo whispered.

"Something smarter," Marei corrected.

They reached a fork in the path Fenna didn't know existed. The star compass vibrated slightly in her hand. It showed currents, but down here they were thinner, like water seeping through cracks. Still, there was that dark line, flashing again and again, like a thought that wouldn't let go.

"Where do we need to go?" asked Tilo.

Fenna followed the glass. "Towards the people."

"To the people?" Tilo sounded as if Fenna had just suggested crawling into a beehive.

"Yes," said Fenna. "If Malrik let us go, he didn't do it so we could leisurely secure crates. He did it to keep us busy while he told the story."

Marei looked at Fenna. "You mean: He's making a scapegoat."

Fenna nodded. "Labels, song, soot. The work is unsettled. And when a work is unsettled, it looks for something tangible. A name. A culprit. Someone to point to so it doesn't have to look in the mirror."

Tilo swallowed. "Who is he going to choose?"

Fenna didn't have to think long. The answer was too logical, too convenient, too perfect.

"Me," she said.

Tilo almost stopped, only stumbling on because the aisle was too narrow to actually stop. "You? Why you?"

"Because I was everywhere," Fenna said. "Because I found things. Because I was the first to say 'deliberately.' Because I saw him. And because I..." She gritted her teeth briefly. "...because I chased him."

Marei whispered: "And because he wants you to look like an exaggerator."

"Or like a saboteur," Fenna said.

Tilo gasped. "That's unfair."

"Unfair is Malrik's favorite form of order," said Marei.

The passage led upwards, a steep ladder, a hatch, then a small storage room with brooms and spare bulbs. Fenna pushed open the hatch, peered out, listened. No direct sound. Not a footstep. Only the distant hum of the machine—and that off-key song that scratched through the air.

They climbed out. Marei closed the hatch again, carefully, as if pushing a secret back beneath the floor. Fenna led them through the storage room into a corridor, then onward toward the main workshop.

The closer they got, the more Fenna sensed that something had changed. Not just in the song, not just in the energy. In the way people stood. The way they huddled together. The way they whispered.

Whispering is contagious. A whisper in the factory is like a gust of wind in the forest: it makes all the leaves rustle at once.

They came around a corner and saw a group of elves gathered in front of a notice board. The board was usually used for shift schedules, break rules, and the occasional "Please stop throwing snowballs into the guardroom corridor" notice. Today, a new sheet of paper hung there—fresh, clean, official.

Too official.

Klirr stood beside her, stiff as a mast in a storm. Niklas wasn't standing directly next to her, but nearby, in that kind of proximity that says: I support you, but I'll let you work. Brann was there, as was Rasko, several overseers, and workshop elves. And right at the front, in the

crowd, stood Malrik Splitterbart, as if he weren't part of the problem, but rather the one kindly explaining it.

Fenna froze for a heartbeat because she suddenly knew that the room was a stage.

And that she would be dragged away immediately afterwards.

She looked at the notice board.

The paper read, in neat, official script:

**PRELIMINARY SECURITY MEASURE: ENTRY BAN FOR FENNA FUNKEL  
(HANGAR & CORE AREA)**

These include: "due to repeated irregularities and unexplained access to sensitive areas of the factory."

Tilo made a noise that sounded like a smothered "No!"

Marei became very quiet.

Fenna felt her blood turn cold. Not from fear. From anger. From the feeling that Malrik was now doing exactly what she had feared: telling the story while she crawled in the maintenance corridor.

Klirr saw Fenna. Her gaze struck Fenna like a hammer, but not to shatter her. To test her. To ask: What is true? What is now?

Malrik also slowly turned around, as if he had been expecting this exact moment.

He didn't smile. He didn't need to. His face said: You see? I didn't have to do anything. The world does it for me.

"Ah," said Malrik loudly enough for everyone to hear. "There she is."

And in his voice was the gentle satisfaction of someone who had just put a noose around someone's neck without anyone noticing that it was a noose.

The moment Malrik said "There she is," Fenna became visible to everyone, as if someone had shone a spotlight on her.

That's the insidious thing about factory floors: they can be large, but when everyone's head turns in the same direction, the space suddenly becomes tiny. Gazes create walls.

Tilo instinctively took a step behind Fenna. He wasn't a fighter, but he had a remarkable talent for hiding behind competent people. Marei remained standing beside Fenna, as still as a book that hadn't been opened in too long. And Fenna sensed that she wasn't just standing against Malrik, but against something far more unpleasant: against a need.

The need for it to be simple.

“Fenna Funkel,” said one of the guards, a broad-shouldered elf with a beard that looked like a badly groomed broom. “You know what that means.”

Fenna looked at him. “That means someone has hung up a paper.”

“This means that you are no longer allowed in the hangar,” he said.

“And not to the core,” another added.

“And not in sensitive areas,” said Rasko, and his voice sounded as if he had practiced these words until they no longer carried any guilt.

Fenna looked at Klirr. Klirr said nothing. But in her eyes was a smooth, metallic anger. Not at Fenna. At the sheet of paper. At the mechanics of the crowd. At the fact that Malrik was stretching a rope right before everyone's eyes.

“Who ordered this?” asked Fenna.

A murmur. The crowd wasn't quite sure. Crowds rarely knew anything for sure. Accuracy is inconvenient. Murmuring is comfortable.

Malrik cleared his throat. “We’ve determined,” he said, and by “we” he obviously meant himself plus his sense of order, “that Fenna has repeatedly been in places where irregularities have occurred in the last few hours. Labels. Pipes. Songs. And each time...” He raised his hands, as if regretting that he even had to utter this information. “...she was there.”

Fenna felt the elves nod. Not because they were convinced. But because it was convenient.

“I was there because I found the irregularities,” Fenna said.

“Or caused it,” Malrik said gently.

Tilo gasped. “That’s—”

Klirr raised a hand. Tilo immediately fell silent, as if Klirr had turned off his sound.

“Proof,” said Klirr.

The word fell into the crowd like a stone in snow.

Some elves blinked. Proof was suddenly a requirement, not a luxury. And requirements make it harder to be comfortable.

Malrik smiled thinly. “It's a precautionary measure. Until we know who had access. Fenna has access. Fenna was there. We're protecting the core.”

“We are protecting the factory,” said the broom-bearded supervisor, who seemed quite comfortable using the word “protect” because it made him feel taller.



Fenna felt anger hardening inside her, forming a clear, defined shape. She looked out at the crowd, at the faces she recognized. Some were ashamed. Some were confused. Some were relieved that someone had finally been named.

And then she saw the young elf in the second row. Boot notch. He stood there as if he were just there by chance. But Fenna saw the tiny pale stripe on his sleeve where she had placed the inspection mark. Invisible to everyone else. A beacon to Fenna.

She raised her gaze and looked at Klirr.

Klirr followed her gaze. Only briefly. Just a twitch that said: I see it.

Fenna exhaled. Good. Then she wasn't alone.

"I have something," Fenna said loudly.

The crowd grew quieter. Not silent, but curiously quiet. Curiosity is the second favorite fuel of rumors. You just have to use it in the right way.

Malrik raised his eyebrows. "Oh? More stories?"

Fenna didn't pull out the star compass. Not yet. Showing a tool too soon is like drawing a knife too soon: everyone focuses on the knife, and no one hears what you're saying.

Instead, Fenna pulled a foil pouch out of her suitcase, containing a reed, carefully insulated.

"The reeds in the special parts warehouse are covered in soot," said Fenna. "This is not a workshop error. This is sabotage."

A murmur rippled through the crowd. The words "special parts warehouse" sounded like a place where you'd rather not find sabotage. Special parts warehouse evokes the idea that nobody was there. Nobody should have been there.

"How do you know that?" Malrik asked, his voice now a touch sharper because Fenna had said something that didn't fit into his comfortable script.

"Because I saw it," said Fenna.

"You were in the camp," said Malrik.

"Yes," said Fenna. "Because the song was wrong. Because I followed the problem."

"And who says you didn't pollinate it yourself?" asked Malrik.

Some heads nodded again, automatically. Not out of conviction. Out of reflex. Reflex is cheap.

Fenna held her gaze. "Because I wasn't alone."

Marei took a step forward.

You could tell that some in the crowd couldn't quite place Marei. Not in uniform. Not in her department. Not "normal." Strangers make people nervous.

"I'm Marei," she said. "I used to maintain the Star Compass. And I saw how the parts were lying there. I saw how warm the song core box was. Warm because someone had been there just before."

"Who are you that we should believe you?" snapped one of the guards.

Marei smiled slightly. "I'm someone who's been here long enough to know that you're desperately searching for a name right now."

Silence. A few elves looked away in shame. Marei had said the unspeakable: that they weren't looking for truth, but for relief.

Klirr stepped forward. "Fenna," she said. "You are under arrest. The document stands."

Fenna felt a prick. Klirr had to say so. Loudly. For the crowd to hear. Klirr was playing a game too, just a different one.

"But," Klirr continued, and you could hear the "but" sound like a crowbar, "measures don't apply to statements. And I'm listening to your statement."

Fenna nodded slowly. "Good."

Malrik folded his arms. "Then listen to what I have to say."

"You already talk too much," said Klirr.

A few elves giggled nervously. This was dangerous because giggling releases tension, and release is a moment when someone can strike.

Fenna glanced briefly at Niklas.

Niklas stood there, calm, but his eyes were heavy. He looked at Malrik, and Fenna realized: Niklas didn't like the limelight. Niklas didn't like public conflict. But Niklas liked sabotage even less.

"The compass," Tilo whispered next to Fenna.

Fenna nodded, almost imperceptibly.

That was their trump card. But also their risk.

If she showed the compass, Malrik would know they could see. And Malrik would react. He would shift the current. He would do something only he could do: change the game again.

Fenna took a deep breath.

Then she pulled the star compass out of the suitcase.

The glass caught the light, and for a moment it seemed as if the artwork itself was looking into this thing.

A collective, audible inhalation went through the crowd.

"What... is that?" someone asked.

Marei calmly said: "A tool that shows where the work is flowing."

Fenna lifted him so that Klirr could see him. And Niklas. And Malrik too.

The bright currents flowed through the glass. And in between – clearly – the dark countercurrent.

A whisper went through the elves, this time not a whisper of rumors, but a frightened whisper because they suddenly saw something they had only felt.

"That's... soot," Brann murmured.

"Resentment," said Marei.

Malrik's eyes narrowed. He said nothing. But Fenna saw it: This wasn't part of his plan.

Klirr stepped closer. "Where did you get that?"

Fenna held her gaze. "Under the workshop floor. In the old cupboard. And someone tried to stop us."

The young eleven in the second row became paler.

Fenna raised her hand slightly and pointed. "There's your access point," she said calmly. "There's your assistant. He had the key. And he's wearing a verification badge on his sleeve."

The crowd turned slowly, like a swarm suddenly changing direction.

The young elf froze.

Malrik said quietly, "Leave him alone."

But it was too late. The word "helper" had reached the crowd. And the crowd loves helpers because helpers are easier than masters.

Klirr stepped in front of the young eleven. "Name."

The boy swallowed. His gaze flickered towards Malrik.

And in that flickering lay the whole proof that Malrik had been unable to prevent.

Fenna sensed it: The scapegoat was changing.

And that was dangerous.

Because if a scapegoat is changed too quickly, the crowd realizes that it has been manipulated.

And then she doesn't look for a name.

Then she looks for a fire.

The young elf looked as if the ground had been pulled out from under his feet and at the same time it had been decided that he should still stand upright.

He swallowed once. Then again. His eyes flickered towards Malrik – a small, desperate movement that Fenna immediately recognized for what it was: Please tell me what to do.

Malrik didn't move. He didn't need to move. Malrik's power lay not in gestures, but in the absence of gestures. When he remained still, the room was compelled to fill him.

Klirr stood directly in front of the boy. "Name," she repeated. Her voice was so flat that any tremor in it would have been noticeable—and she never trembled.

"I... I..." stammered the boy.

"Name," Klirr said a third time. That wasn't a threat. That was a bolt snapping shut.

The boy broke free – not physically, but more internally. "Jaro," he blurted out.

A few elves murmured the name, as if a name alone could explain why things went wrong.

"Jaro," said Klirr. "Department?"

"Walking routes... uh... maintenance," Jaro stammered.

Fenna saw Brann subtly raise his eyebrows. Walkway maintenance was exactly the kind of job where you could be anywhere without anyone asking why you were there. Perfect camouflage. Or a perfect tool.

"You had the key to the cupboard under the workshop floor," said Klirr.

Jaro pressed his lips together. His gaze returned to Malrik.

Malrik said quietly: "You don't have to answer."

And that was the moment when the crowd first truly understood that Malrik was not just a random observer.

A few heads turned towards Malrik. Eyebrows rose. Someone whispered, "Why is he saying that?"

Fenna sensed a small crack appearing in Malrik's comfortable story.

Klirr not only heard the whisper – she used it. "Why," she asked calmly, "shouldn't he answer?"

Malrik smiled thinly. "Because you just had a boy..."

"Eleven," corrected Alva from the crowd, and her voice was suddenly there, as if she had been sitting in the walls the whole time.

Malrik blinked briefly, as if it bothered him.

"...because you're putting eleven under pressure," Malrik continued. "And because pressure causes mistakes. We're here to avoid mistakes."

"We are here to stop sabotage," Klirr said.

"Sabotage," Malrik repeated, as if it were an exaggerated word. "You all use it so often."

Fenna held the star compass higher. The currents continued to flow in the glass. The dark band stretched clearly across the hall. People stared into it as if they could suddenly see their own worries.

"That's not a word," said Fenna. "That's visible."

Malrik glanced briefly at the compass, then back at the faces. Fenna saw him calculating. Not frantically. Just... new.

"Jaro," said Klirr, turning back to the boy. "You were in the special parts warehouse."

Jaro shook his head vigorously. "No! I... I... I was just..."

"You were in the special parts warehouse," Fenna said calmly. "You touched the box of song seeds. It was warm."

Jaro turned paler. "I... I just had to..."

"You just had to," Marei repeated. "Exactly. And who told you that you just had to?"

Jaro squeezed his eyes shut, as if hoping the truth would then disappear. "I... I wanted to help."

"To whom?" asked Klirr.

Jaro opened his eyes and looked back at Malrik.

Malrik made a small, barely perceptible movement. A slight shake of his head. Not as a warning. As a command.

Fenna felt something harden inside her. That was it. That was the hand you don't usually see.

"Jaro," Fenna said, her voice softer now. Not because she suddenly felt pity, but because sometimes softness cuts sharper than harshness. "If you don't say anything now, you'll hang alone. And he'll go free."

Jaro flinched as if Fenna had just given him a new kind of fear, and this fear was greater because it was true.

Klirr nodded slightly. Agreement.

Jaro took a deep breath. Then he said, very quietly: "He said..."

Malrik raised his head. His gaze was suddenly cold. Not angry. Coldness is angrier than anger.

"He said," Jaro repeated, louder, "I should mark the boxes. I should... prepare them. So that it goes faster."

"Who?" asked Klirr.

Jaro closed his eyes. Then he opened them again and said, in a voice that was fragile yet clear:

"Malrik."

For a moment, there was silence.

Not the nervous stillness, but what comes when a room simultaneously inhales and forgets to exhale.

Then the whispering began, like snow sliding off a roof.

"Did he—"

"I knew—"

"That can't—"

"But he always helps—"

Malrik stopped, as if it hadn't affected him. But Fenna saw it: a small muscle in his jaw. A hint of tension.

He took a step forward. "Jaro," he said calmly, "you are confused. You are under pressure. You want to save yourself, so you say my name."

"I'm not confused!" Jaro shouted, suddenly too loud, suddenly too real. "You said nobody would notice. You said it's just a little soot. You said it's... fair."

The word "just" made a few elves in the crowd flinch. Just was a dangerous word. It always sounds as if you just have to say it, and then something will be right. But it's often the beginning of something ugly.

Malrik raised his hands. "See? He's talking incoherently. Soot? Justice? The boy has imagination."

"He is afraid," said Alva.

"And fear rarely lies in the details," Brann said.

Klirr stepped in front of Malrik, so close that one realized: This is no longer theater. This is a bar snapping shut on the perpetrator.

"Malrik Splitterbart," said Klirr. "From now on, you will be accompanied. You will no longer lay your hands on machines. You will no longer be alone."

Malrik smiled. "You don't have the authority—"

"Yes," said Niklas, and his voice cut through the room like a bell suddenly becoming serious.

Everyone was looking at him.

Niklas stepped closer. Not angrily. Just resolutely. "I'm giving her the authority," he said. "And I'm withdrawing my trust from you."

A murmur. Trust was almost a physical substance here. When you take it away, it turns cold.

Malrik looked at Niklas. For a moment there was something like... regret? Or an imitation of it. "Niklas," he said quietly, "you don't know what you're doing."

"Yes," said Niklas. "I'll stop you."

Malrik laughed softly. "You're not stopping me. You're only stopping the idea that everything will continue like this."

Then, quite suddenly, Malrik raised his hand – not to strike, but to do something smaller.

He snapped his fingers.

A tiny noise.

But the star compass in Fenna's hand flickered.

The dark line in the glass contracted, like a muscle tensing. The bright streams trembled.

And somewhere in the factory a sound could be heard.

That one note, too low.

Only this time it wasn't from a music box.

She was out of the building.

A dull, vibrating hum that went through the floor, through the walls, through hearts.

"What was that?" someone whispered.

Marei turned deathly pale. "He's changed the beat," she said.

Alva whispered: "The heart tree..."

Niklas's gaze hardened. "Where?"

Fenna stared at the compass. The dark current was no longer just shooting towards the hangar. It now wound its way through the factory like an arrow, direct and fast.

"Polarhof," said Fenna. "To the Heart Tree. Now."

Malrik was still standing there, calm, and in his gaze was something that Fenna hated because it was so certain:

He had just removed their scapegoat by giving them an even bigger catastrophe.

The crowd scattered, suddenly full of purpose. Klirr gave orders. Brann ran. Niklas started moving.

And Fenna, with the compass in her hand, ran along.

Because the question was no longer who was to blame.

The question now was whether the factory could even breathe in time.

## Grandma Alva's story

The path to the Polarhof was one of those paths that, on the factory's map, appear to be a normal connection, but in reality are a kind of threshold. You enter it as if into a corridor and emerge as if from a thought you can't shake.

Fenna ran, and the star compass ran with her, at least in the sense that it vibrated in her hands as if it had decided that running was a sensible response to gloom. Around her, the factory suddenly operated not by routine, but by instinct. Elves streamed out of corridors, tools were dropped, crates were left behind, and somewhere someone shouted for a ladder, as if a ladder were a universal cure for everything that was wrong.

Klirr was running in front, as always, as if she'd drawn a line in her head and the world now had to follow it. Niklas was moving, not fast in a frantic sense, but fast in the "every step counts" sense. Brann ran like someone who'd seen too many times how small things can lead to big things. Tilo ran like someone who'd never seen small things lead to big things and was currently catching up on that experience in fast forward.

Alva didn't run. Alva walked.

And that was the uncanny part.

As everything around her shifted into disaster mode, Alva walked with the calm pace of an elf who knows that disasters aren't impressed by speed. She clutched her scarf tightly, as if it



were an ancient pact with the cold, and her eyes were fixed on the ground, not because she was afraid of tripping, but because she apparently saw something others didn't.

Fenna took a deep breath and managed to stay beside Alva. This wasn't easy, because Alva's walking had a kind of efficiency that defied any form of panic.

"Why are you leaving?" Fenna gasped.

"Because I've already run once," said Alva, without getting out of breath. "And it didn't make anything better."

Fenna almost stumbled over this sentence because it was so calm that it felt like a stone in a storm.

They arrived at the Polar Courtyard, and the courtyard was different from the rest of the factory. There, the air wasn't filled with sawdust and songs, but with snow, resin, and that special stillness that arises when a place longs to be outdoors but is trapped indoors. The Polar Courtyard was an inner courtyard, open to the sky beneath the dome, where large snowdrifts were artificially maintained to make everything appear "natural." It was the kind of naturalness that only comes about through regular repairs.

The heart tree stood in the middle.

It was so named because its trunk was older than all the halls around it, because its roots ran through the factory like a memory, and because, if you looked closely, it actually pulsed. Not visibly like a heart in a chest, but more like a breath, a slow, patient rise and fall of warmth in a trunk that had decided to stay alive even when everything around it was built.

Now the heart tree was buzzing.

Not deep and soothing, but deep and false. Like a sound you feel before you hear it.

Fenna raised the star compass. The currents trembled in the glass, as if spinning in circles, unsure of which way was up. The dark band ran directly to the tree, wrapping itself around it like smoke around a torch.

"There," said Fenna.

Klirr said nothing. She was already at the barrier rope, and with a look that wasn't really a look, but a decision, she cut through it. Two guards wanted to say something, but didn't, because Klirr was the kind of person who made you instinctively take your hands out of your pockets.

Niklas stopped a step away from the tree. His hand didn't touch the trunk. Not because he was afraid, but because you don't just touch things called hearts when they're restless.

Alva stepped beside him. And then, strangely enough, she stopped, placed her hand on the trunk and closed her eyes, as if she were not touching the tree, but a time.

Fenna observed this, and an uncomfortable realization grew within her: This wasn't just sabotage of a component. This was something that touched on stories.

“Alva,” Fenna said softly. “What is that?”

Alva didn't open her eyes immediately. She let her fingers rest on the trunk, as if she could feel how much it was lying.

"This isn't the first time," she finally said.

Klirr stepped closer. "I suspected as much."

“Of course you do,” Alva murmured. “You guess things like other people guess the weather.”

“Tell me,” Klirr said, and it wasn't an order. It was an admission that some truths only come from the mouth of someone who has been silent long enough.

Alva withdrew her hand from the trunk, glanced at it briefly as if surprised it was still intact, and began to speak without much of an introduction. Alva didn't make introductions. Introductions are for people who hope to be interrupted.

“Back then,” she said, “the Polarhof was smaller. And the tree was even... wilder. It didn't pretend to be just decoration. It fought back when you tried to trim it.”

Brann, who had just appeared with a toolbox, stopped as if Alva's voice had hung him on a nail.

“There was one winter,” Alva continued, “when the factory was too loud. Too cheerful, if you understand. Not cheerful in the sense of joy, but cheerful in the sense of duty. Everyone was singing because they thought they had to. Everyone was laughing because they thought that was the sound that belonged there.”

Tilo whispered: "That sounds like..."

Klirr looked at him, and Tilo swallowed the sentence. Fenna heard it anyway: It sounds just like today.

“And then,” said Alva, “came the spark. It didn't come with a big bang. It came with a cough. A little smoke, a little heat, a little panic. And suddenly everyone was running.”

Fenna felt the air in the courtyard become even colder. Not because of snow. Because of memory.

“There was smoke everywhere,” Alva said. “And in that smoke was something that didn't belong. Not just soot. Not just ash. Something that clings to feelings. To anger, to disappointment, to all the things you don't say because you think you're not allowed to say them. It didn't suffocate people. It made them... wrong.”

“Grollruß,” said Marei softly, who had appeared somewhere at the edge, as if she had always been there and had only been waiting for the right word.

Alva nodded. "I didn't know what it was called back then. I only knew that people suddenly looked at each other instead of at each other. That they blamed each other instead of fetching

water. That one said, 'You knocked over the lantern,' and the other said, 'You hung it up wrong,' and while they talked, the smoke continued to spread."

Niklas's face was still, but Fenna saw his eyes grow heavy. He knew this story. He just hadn't wanted to hear it for a long time.

"And Malrik?" asked Fenna, although she already suspected it, and yet she had to hear it, because otherwise it would only remain a shadow.

Alva's gaze briefly drifted to the side, as if she saw Malrik standing somewhere where he wasn't.

"Malrik was helpful back then," she said. The word came out with difficulty, as if it had teeth. "He was everywhere. He had keys. He knew routes. He was fast, and everyone admired that because speed in a panic looks like courage."

"And was it courage?" Klirr asked.

Alva smiled dryly. "Courage is when you do something even though you're afraid. Malrik was never afraid. He... enjoyed the situation."

Fenna felt her fingertips grip the compass. Joy in the moment. That was worse than malice. Malice is often fleeting. Joy is patient.

"He got people out," Alva said. "He opened doors. He saved things. And afterwards, when the smoke cleared, everyone was so grateful that they didn't ask why he was everywhere in the first place. They just said, 'Such a good elf. So reliable.'"

"And you gave him access," said Klirr, not accusingly, but merely stating a fact.

Alva nodded. "Yes. I thought I was rewarding help. In truth, I gave him a tool. And I taught the machine to trust it."

She turned back to the heart-shaped tree. "The fire back then damaged the tree. Not visibly, not like a piece of wood breaking. But it shifted something in the rhythm. Since then, the courtyard sings differently, if you listen closely. A touch less... certainly."

Fenna heard the tree humming, and suddenly it wasn't just a sound. It was a sentence.

"He's doing it again," Fenna whispered.

Alva nodded slowly. "Yes. Only this time he's not satisfied with people running. This time he wants them to tear each other apart while he freezes the tree."

Brann stepped closer. "And how do you stop something like that?"

Alva looked at him, and there was something in her gaze that frightened Fenna because it was so simple.

"You don't stop it by racing," Alva said. "You stop it by finally looking at where it comes from. And by stopping pretending that all the songs are right."

The heart tree hummed once more. Deeper. More dissatisfied.

And Fenna knew: This was only the beginning of Alva's story. The part that had been kept secret for so long was only just beginning.

Alva's gaze was fixed on the heart tree, but she didn't see the trunk. She saw right through it, as if wood were just a thin skin over something older and more stubborn.

"The fire back then," she said, "wasn't an accident. Not really."

It was the sentence no one wanted to hear. You could tell by how quiet the courtyard became. Even the snowdrifts seemed to briefly cease pretending to be natural.

The clang sounded like metal. Niklas took a deep breath, very slowly, as if trying to give the sentence some space without suffocating under its weight. Brann gripped the toolbox tighter. Marei stayed to the side, her hands still, as if stillness were the only thing she could contribute right now. Tilo looked back and forth between Alva and the tree, as if expecting a moral codebook to fall from somewhere.

"Many thought it was a spark that fell from a lamp," Alva continued. "Others said a stove had acted up. And some said: The Polarhof is just a bit... peculiar. It's outdoors, even though it's indoors. That's just how things happen outdoors."

She snorted softly. "Convenient explanations. They're warm. They're perfect for cold nights."

Fenna held the compass so that Alva could see it, if Alva wanted to look. Alva didn't. Alva didn't need devices to know things. That was sometimes admirable, and sometimes a problem.

"When the smoke came," Alva said, "I didn't reach for water first. I looked for the source. Because I thought: If I find it, I can stop the whole thing. That was my mistake. I thought the world could be stopped if you were just fast enough."

She smiled dryly, briefly. "She can't be stopped. She can only be guided. And Malrik knew that."

Klirr said softly: "You saw him back then."

Alva nodded. "Yes."

Fenna felt her throat go dry. "Where?"

"Not in the smoke," Alva said. "He wasn't where the danger was. He was where the smoke was supposed to go."

Without actually raising her arm, more of an inner gesture, she pointed to a corner of the Polar Courtyard, where a small side passage led towards the workshop. Today, there were snow crates and a few empty shovels there. Inconspicuous. That was precisely what made it suspicious.

"There," said Alva. "He was standing there and... listening."

"Did you listen?" Brann sounded as if the word were an insult.

"Yes," said Alva. "Not the voices. The work. He heard the beat. He realized where the song was about to tip. And then he did something."

Marei stepped closer. "You mean he changed the beat."

Alva looked at her, and in that look lay: You understand.

"He didn't just spread soot," Alva said. "He fed it. He put it in the places where we were already biting our tongues. Into the little resentments. Into the weariness. Into those tiny moments when you think: Why do I always have to smile when all I want to do is sleep?"

Fenna felt something inside her tighten because it was so true it almost hurt. The artwork wasn't just a place. It was a feeling. And feelings can be manipulated if you know where they're weak.

"And you?" asked Klirr.

Alva exhaled. "I confronted him."

Niklas raised his head. "You have what?"

Alva nodded, and now she looked directly at Niklas. "I went to him. I was angry. And I was tired. And I said: What are you doing?"

"And?" asked Fenna.

Alva's gaze briefly wandered to the sky beneath the dome, as if she remembered how the smoke had risen back then.

"He looked at me," Alva said quietly, "as if I were naive. As if I had just asked why water is wet. And he said: I'll do what's necessary."

"Needed for what?" Brann asked.

Alva snorted. "For justice, of course. He likes to use that word when he wants to make his own bitterness look nice."

Fenna thought of Jaros as "fair". It fit like a puzzle piece that you don't want to touch.

"He said," Alva continued, "that the work devours us all. That it takes us and takes us and takes us – our time, our voices, our true thoughts – and gives us only songs in return. He said that joy is a chain. And that someone has to break it."

"And you didn't stop him back then," said Klirr.

That wasn't a criticism. It was an observation that made for a difficult whole night.

Alva lowered her gaze. "No."

“Why?” asked Fenna, and she hated herself a little for the word, because it sounded so simple and yet was so big.

Alva looked down at her hands again. "Because he showed me something."

"What?" asked Marei.

Alva took the scarf from her neck and held it for a moment, as if checking if it was still there. Then she said, "He showed me how soot is made. Not from fire. From knots."

Fenna felt her stomach cramp. "What knots?"

Alva looked into the courtyard as if she could still see the elves from back then standing there. "Knots of things left unsaid. Knots of resentment. Knots of feeling unseen, even though you're keeping everything running."

Tilo whispered: "That sounds... normal."

“Exactly,” said Alva. “It’s normal. And that’s precisely why it’s dangerous. Because normal means: everywhere. Normal means: you can always find a place to pull on it.”

Klirr nodded slowly. "And Malrik pulled on it."

Alva raised his head. “He told me: You can stop me, Alva. You can throw me out of the factory. But then the soot won't be gone. It will only grow somewhere else. In another heart. In another winter. Or in you.”

Fenna felt the phrase hanging in the air. It was insidious because it wasn't just a threat. It was also... true enough to make her hesitate.

"And you hesitated," said Klirr.

Alva nodded. "I hesitated. I thought: Maybe he can be... guided. Maybe he can be used to untangle the worst knots. I was stupid."

"No," Marei said quietly. "You were desperate."

Alva laughed briefly. "Despair is the pretty sister of stupidity."

Niklas stepped closer. "Why did you never tell me?"

Alva looked at him, and now there was something in her eyes that Fenna had rarely seen in Alva: pain. Not dramatic. Quiet.

“Because you were young back then,” Alva said. “And because you needed faith. You had to believe the work was good, otherwise you wouldn’t have borne it. And I... I didn’t want to give you that burden.”

Niklas's face remained calm, but Fenna saw that this sentence affected him. Not because he was blaming Alva, but because he understood that Alva wanted to protect him – and in doing so, kept him blind.

The heart tree hummed again. This time not just deeply. But... impatiently. Like a heart saying: Your stories are interesting, but I'm dying.

Fenna raised the compass. The dark stream had thickened. It wound itself around the trunk like a ribbon, and part of it shot downwards, into the roots.

"He's pulling it into the tree," said Fenna.

Marei stepped closer and looked into the glass. "When the heart tree gets cold, the work loses its rhythm."

"And then," Tilo whispered, "...everything falls apart."

Alva placed her hand on the trunk again. "Back then," she said, "I saw something else. Something I've never forgotten."

"What?" asked Klirr.

Alva's voice trailed off. "The soot didn't just come from Malrik. Malrik used it. But he didn't invent it."

Fenna felt her neck get cold. "Then there's a spring."

Alva nodded. "There is a source. And it lies deeper than we thought back then. Deeper than the fire. Deeper than a single elf."

Marei whispered: "Under the roots."

Alva looked at her. "Yes."

Klirr stepped closer. "You know where?"

Alva closed her eyes briefly, as if scanning the courtyard, and said: "I know how to find them. But for that..."

She opened her eyes.

"...you must stop just hunting Malrik. You must hunt what feeds Malrik."

The heart tree hummed once more, and this time the humming was so deep that Fenna felt it in her teeth.

And somewhere in the factory, far away, someone was still singing the wrong song.

Alva's hand rested on the trunk, and Fenna had the feeling that she wasn't touching wood, but a pulse. An old, stubborn pulse that had beaten long enough to believe it could endure anything. And right now, this pulse was offended because someone was forcing something into its veins that didn't belong there.

"How do you find the source?" Klirr asked.

It sounded simple. It wasn't simple. Nothing that is called "source" is simple when you find it in a work built on songs.

Alva slowly withdrew her hand. Her fingers weren't trembling. But Fenna saw that her skin felt a touch colder, as if the tree had taken something away from her. Or given something to her.

"You can't find them with your eyes," said Alva. "You can find them with what you all like to push away."

"Fear?" Tilo asked hopefully, because he was very good at feeling fear.

"No," said Alva. "Anger."

Tilo looked as if he'd just been told his best friend was suddenly bad for him. "Anger?"

"Anger is honest," said Alva. "If you don't lock it away. It shows you where something is wrong. Malrik knows that. That's why he feeds the soot with anger that no one is allowed to express."

Marei nodded slowly. "And the soot collects where it finds the most purchase."

"In knots," Fenna said.

Alva pointed to the roots that protruded from the ground and disappeared into the compacted snowdrifts. "The heart tree has roots. The work has paths. And beneath it... beneath it is the old North Pole."

Klirr narrowed his eyes. "You mean the old corridors."

Alva nodded. "Yes. The ones that were closed off because people thought there was nothing down there but frost and old beams. There's something else down there."

Fenna held the compass in front of her. The lines in the glass trembled, but they were legible. The bright lines flowed around the tree. The dark line, however... sank. It pressed downwards, like a weight trying to sink into the ice.

"Things are going downhill," said Fenna.

"Of course," said Brann. "All bad things go down. That's physics."

"And mythology," Tilo murmured.

Niklas looked from Fenna to the tree, then to Alva. "We don't have much time."

Alva nodded. "I know. That's why I'm telling you now. Because I stayed silent back then, and now... now I'm paying the price."

"We'll all pay," Niklas said quietly.



Klirr stepped to the edge of the Heart Tree area, where some of the snow had been artificially piled up. She looked down as if she were piercing the ground. Then she said, "Where is the entrance?"

Alva went to the tree, knelt down, and for a moment Fenna felt this absurd thought: Alva is a grandmother, and yet she is kneeling here like a mechanic taking apart an engine.

Alva pushed the snow aside. Beneath the snow, wood was revealed. Not just floorboards. A lid. An old lid with an inlaid metal ring, so inconspicuous that you only see it if you want to see it.

"Here," said Alva.

Brann growled. "Has this been the whole time?"

"Yes," said Alva. "And nobody looks under the snow when the tree is glittering."

Klirr also knelt down and examined the ring. "Locked."

Alva smiled dryly. "Of course. You lock away things you want to forget."

Fenna pulled the old key out of her pocket – the wide one Jaro had had. She held it up. "This one might fit."

Klirr looked at her. "You kept him."

"I saved him," said Fenna.

"Keep that definition," Klirr murmured. "It might help you later."

Fenna knelt down and inserted the key into the lock on the ring. It fit with an insulting ease, as if the lock had been waiting for years to finally be used again.

She turned.

A dull click. A breath of air rose, cold and stale, as if a cellar had been exhaling for years.

Brann reached for the ring and lifted it. The lid was heavy. Not just because of the wood. Because of its history.

The lid opened.

Below: darkness. A ladder. And air that smelled of something Fenna couldn't immediately name. Not dust. Not metal. More like... cold ash and damp stone.

"This is... not a work," Tilo whispered.

"No," said Alva. "That's underneath."

The heart tree hummed, and Fenna sensed how the humming had changed since the lid had been opened. It was as if the tree had felt the door open below and was simultaneously relieved and panicked.

"Who's leaving?" Klirr asked.

"I do," Fenna said immediately.

"Me too," said Brann.

Tilo took a tiny step back and still said: "Me too."

Everyone looked at him.

Tilo swallowed. "I can't... always just... I mean... I threw candy canes. I can throw ladders too."

Marei stepped closer. "I'm leaving," she said.

Klirr looked at Niklas. "You're staying."

Niklas wanted to object. You could see it. Then he saw the tree. And he nodded.

"I'll hold up," said Niklas. "And I'll hold Malrik."

"Don't hold him too tightly," Alva murmured. "He likes it when you think he's important."

Klirr gave a brief nod. "Go."

Brann descended first, heavily, surely. Fenna followed, her compass close to her body. Tilo hesitated a heartbeat, then climbed, and you could hear him curse softly with each rung, which was probably his prayer. Marei came last, and before she descended, she glanced briefly at Alva.

"You're not coming?" Marei asked quietly.

Alva shook her head. "Not this time. This time the boys must see the darkness, otherwise they will believe it is just a fairy tale again."

Marei nodded, and in that nod lay: I understand, but I don't like it.

She descended.

The clinking sound remained at the top of the opening, the lamp in hand, eyes sharp.

"If you find the source," she said, "give me a sign."

Fenna looked up. "If we can give a sign," she said.

Then she was downstairs.

The lid remained open. Lights glittered above. Below it was black.

Fenna turned on the lamp.

And the light fell on stone walls that didn't belong to the work, but to something older. Walls where moisture collected like ancient secrets. The passage led into darkness, and somewhere within it, very faintly, Fenna heard a sound that wasn't an echo.

A whisper.

Not from voices.

From wind.

And the wind sounded... as if it knew a song that nobody sings properly anymore.

## The secret stash

Under the heart-shaped tree, the North Pole was no longer festive. It was simply old.

The stone absorbed sounds instead of reflecting them back. Every step sounded as if it were being sucked into something that had long waited to be used again. Fenna held the star compass before her, and the glass vibrated so subtly that it could almost have been mistaken for the weariness of her own hands. But it wasn't weariness. It was recognition.

"This is... real," Tilo whispered, and his voice sounded as if he were ashamed to be there at all.

"The artwork is real," Brann murmured. "It just has more glitter on it."

Marei walked behind Fenna, silent as a thought. She no longer held the box of song seeds – it had remained upstairs, sealed, under Klirr's gaze. Down here, she carried only her amulet, which was embedded in the compass, and her own inner peace.

The passage sloped gently downwards. Damp stone, a thin layer of ice at the edges, and in between... crevices. Something dark lay in the crevices.

Fenna knelt down, shining her light into the cracks. It wasn't just dirt. It looked as if someone had rubbed ash into the crevices. The ash wasn't dry. It was sticky, as if it had decided to live there.

"Resentment," whispered Marei.

"He is stronger down here," said Fenna.

Brann snorted. "Because nobody laughs down here."

Tilo made a small, exasperated noise. "I don't usually laugh either, but this is still..."

Fenna stood up again. The compass pulled. Not like a magnet, more like a direction in her head that suddenly became clear, even though she had never learned it.

"The secret stash," Marei said quietly.

Fenna looked at her. "You know what we'll find."

Marei nodded. "I saw it once. Years ago. Shortly before they closed access. They didn't call it that. They called it a 'security storage'. But in reality, it was a stockpile of things you'd rather not have in the workshop."

"Like soot-dusted song seeds?" Tilo murmured.

"Like everything that has power," Marei said.

The corridor ended at a door.

Not a workshop door. No number, no sign. An old metal door set into stone, as if someone had cut into the stone to conceal it. Above the door, a symbol was carved: a star that didn't glitter, but was sharp. Below it, a circle. And below that, a line.

Fenna felt a click in her mind. Star. Circle. Line. These weren't decorations. These were markings. Signposts, if you knew how to read them.

"That's an old code," Fenna said.

Marei nodded. "For people who were allowed to work down here."

Brann stepped outside and pulled on the handle.

Nothing.

"Locked," Brann growled.

Fenna pulled out the wide key. "Let's try it."

She put it on. It didn't fit.

The castle refused to accept him, as if offended that Fenna had even asked.

"Of course," Fenna murmured.

Tilo whispered: "That would have been too easy."

Marei stepped closer, lifted her amulet – now stuck in the compass – and touched the engraved symbols with her finger. "This isn't a key lock. This is a... song lock."

Brann stared at her. "What?"

"The heart tree wasn't just decoration," said Marei. "It was always singing. Not audible to everyone, but... in the factory. Some doors down here react to the rhythm."

Fenna held the compass closer to the door. The currents in the glass converged at that point. And the dark current wasn't just a band here. It was a knot.

"That's the knot," said Fenna.

"And behind the knot... the supply," Marei murmured.

Brann growled. "Then we'll set off."

"No," Fenna said immediately.

Brann looked at her. "Why not?"

"Because then you're doing exactly what Malrik wants," Fenna said. "You're making noise. You're leaving traces. You're creating a story he can use later: 'They broke something down there.'"

Tilo raised his hand. "By the way, I'm very good at making noise. In case... anyone asks."

"Nobody asks," said Fenna.

Marei leaned towards the door and listened. "Do you hear that?"

Fenna held her breath. Brann fell silent. Even Tilo fell silent, and that was quite a feat.

A very faint humming sound came from the door.

Not the song from the factory floor. A different one. Older. Deeper. Not a cheerful song. A song that sounds as if it were built to soothe walls.

"The door is singing," Tilo whispered, and there was sheer disbelief in his tone, as if that were the limit of his world.

"Not the door," Marei said. "The room behind it. He's waiting."

Fenna felt her heart beat faster. A room that waits is rarely welcoming.

"How do you open them?" asked Fenna.

Marei looked at the symbols. "Star. Circle. Line. That is... a rhythm. Three beats. One long one. Then two short ones. Or vice versa."

Brann gritted his teeth. "So, do we knock?"

"Knocks are a start," said Marei. "But it has to be... right."

Fenna raised her hand and tapped the metal with her fingers: one long tap, two short taps. She didn't do it loudly. She did it like someone tapping on a memory.

Nothing.

Tilo whispered: "Maybe the other way around?"

Fenna made two substitutions: two short, one long.

Nothing again.

Brann growled. "Or it's broken."

Marei shook her head. "No. It just doesn't listen to us. It listens to the rhythm of the heart tree."

Fenna felt a prick. The heart tree was up. Humming. Restless.

"If the tree beats the wrong way," said Fenna, "then the door hears the wrong song."

Marei nodded. "Exactly. And Malrik knows that. If he makes the tree cold, doors like this will stay closed. Then things will stay down below. Then the source will remain hidden."

Tilo whispered: "So we need to calm the tree down?"

"Or we can slow the pace down here," said Fenna.

Brann looked at her. "How so?"

Fenna looked at the star compass. The amulet was in it, the glass showed currents. And in the currents she suddenly saw something that was not just direction, but... possibility: a bright line that ran from them back to the tree, like a rope.

"The compass can do more than just point," Fenna said slowly. "It can... couple."

Marei raised her eyebrows. "You want to use the compass as a bridge."

"I want to get the rhythm going," said Fenna.

Brann snorted. "That sounds like a lot of magic."

"The work is full of magic," said Fenna. "We just forgot that it doesn't always sparkle."

She placed the compass in front of the door, holding it so that the glass reflected the engraved symbols. Then she placed both hands on the compass, as if making a plea.

And somewhere in her head she heard the wrong song, the one note too low that was making the piece sick.

"Please," Fenna whispered, and she didn't know who she was speaking to. To the tree. To the compass. To herself.

The glass in the compass became cloudy briefly.

Then it began to pulse in a very subtle rhythm.

One blow.

Another one.

And Fenna felt it: The rhythm of the heart tree – faint, but there – flowed through the metal in her hands, as if someone were tightening a string.

Marei held her breath.

Fenna tapped again: star, circle, line. This time in the same pulse she felt in the compass.

A soft click.

The door was breathing.

And then she opened a crack, as if reluctantly admitting that she knew the melody.

Darkness lay behind the door.

And a smell that smelled of old wood and old promises.

"The supply," Marei whispered.

Brann grabbed the crack in the door and pulled.

The door opened.

And the darkness beyond didn't feel empty.

It felt full.

Darkness can be many things: absence of light, absence of overview, absence of good decisions.

This darkness was primarily due to the absence of fresh air.

As Brann fully opened the door, a smell wafted towards them that wasn't simply "old." It was as old as an attic where someone had stored something for decades that they no longer wanted to touch. Wood, leather, metal—and underneath it all, a wisp of ash so fine that it didn't smell of fire, but of the very thought of it.

Fenna turned the lamp up, and the light fell into the room.

It was larger than it should have been from the outside. That was the first indication that different rules applied down here. The room was hewn into the stone, but not roughly, rather with care. As if someone who knew the work had decided that some things needed their own place – not in the workshop, not in the warehouse, but in a cellar that felt like a secret.

Shelves lined the walls, thick and sturdy, filled with boxes. Some boxes were labeled. Others were not. Some had wax seals that had long since become dull. Some seals bore a star. Others a symbol Fenna didn't recognize: a kind of knot.

"I don't like this," Tilo whispered, and this time it wasn't just nervousness. It was instinct. "It feels like the room is watching us."

"He's looking at us," said Marei. "He's built for that."

Brann stepped in first, as always, heavy and sure. Fenna followed with the compass, and the moment she crossed the threshold, the currents in the glass trembled so violently that she almost thought it would jump from her hands.

"What's wrong?" asked Brann.

Fenna held the compass steady. "Too many currents."

"Too much... what?" Tilo looked into the glass and shuddered. "It looks like spiders in the snow."

It wasn't entirely wrong. The light lines were denser here, intersecting, forming patterns as if paths were stacked upon paths. It was as if the space were a hub for everything the work would rather not leave lying around in plain sight.

And in between: dark spots. Not one large stream like in the heart tree, but small nests. Like soot that collects in corners and says: I'm just a little bit, I'm not doing anything.

Fenna was familiar with this "I do nothing" attitude by now.

"The supply is not clean," she muttered.

Marei nodded. "Never been. He's just... controlled."

Fenna walked slowly along the shelves. She read the labels, as far as they were still legible:

Spare blades – Sled bell cores – For emergency star dust only (old) – Do not inhale thread of direction – Use with gloves only

Tilo paused at "DO NOT INHALE". "I suddenly have a lot of questions."

"Questions are good," said Fenna. "But later."

Brann bent down to a crate whose wax seal was still intact. "What's in here?"

Marei shook her head. "Don't open it just because you're curious."

"I'm not curious," Brann growled. "I'm practical. If there's a supply down here, it might be exactly what we need to save the tree."

Fenna nodded. "Yes. But if Malrik knows about this..."

"Then he may have already poisoned it," said Tilo.

"Or he wants us to open it," Marei said.



Fenna continued walking, the compass leading her unmistakably to a shelf in the middle of the room. There was no box there, but a dark wooden cabinet, smaller than the one above, but of a similar style. And on the door: again a star, a circle, a line.

"Another song door," Fenna murmured.

Marei stepped closer. "This isn't for tools. This is for..."

She fell silent when she saw the castle.

The lock wasn't an ordinary lock. It was a ring with small notches milled into it, like a tiny musical staff. And in the middle, a hole that wasn't made for a key, but for something round.

"The amulet," Fenna whispered.

Marei nodded slowly. "Yes."

Tilo swallowed. "So the amulet is... more than just jewelry."

"Much more," said Marei.

Fenna looked at Marei. "Why did you really do it?"

Marei met Fenna's gaze. "Because I took it out back then, before they sealed everything. So that no one could use the supply without someone like me. So that no eager helper would think he could restore order down here."

"Or sabotage," Fenna murmured.

Marei didn't answer directly, but her face said: Exactly.

Fenna exhaled. "Then use it."

Marei hesitated. Only briefly, but enough for Fenna to notice.

"What is it?" asked Fenna.

Marei looked at the cupboard as if she were observing an animal that shouldn't be disturbed. "If we open this, the compass will see it too. And if the compass sees it..."

"...then maybe Malrik will see it too," Fenna finished.

"Yes," said Marei. "The streams are not private."

Brann growled. "He already knows we're here. He showed us the way."

"No," said Fenna. "He didn't show us the way. He just shifted the tempo. We found the way. That's the difference."

Tilo tentatively raised his hand. "And what if we ruin the difference now by making the... uh... currents... louder?"

Fenna looked at the compass again. The bright lines flickered. The dark patches sat like stains. Somewhere, beyond the wall, the great dark current flowed along the heart tree. And her pulse was weaker than before.

Time.

"We have no choice," said Fenna.

Marei swallowed. Then she carefully pulled the amulet out of the compass. The glass immediately became slightly cloudy, as if one eye had been covered.

Marei placed the amulet in the lock ring of the cabinet. It fit perfectly. Of course it fit. It was made for that purpose, and that was always the most unsettling kind of "fit."

She turned it.

The lock clicked – but not like metal. It sounded like a tone. A small, clear note that hung in the room, and for a moment it sounded so right that Fenna almost forgot that everything outside was wrong.

Then Marei opened the closet door.

Inside there was no dust. No tools. No box.

Inside was a bundle.

A small sack made of dark red fabric, tightly tied. The fabric looked old, but not rotten. More like something that refused to age because it was too important.

Beside the sack lay a thick-walled glass bottle with a cork stopper. Inside the bottle shimmered a pale powder, finer than stardust, yet not so friendly. It didn't glow. It merely shone... as if it knew more.

And underneath it, flat in a drawer, lay a small book. Not a real book, more like a booklet, bound in leather, with a symbol on the cover: a knot.

Fenna felt the compass in her hand suddenly pull, as if pointing at the notebook, like a finger at a culprit.

"What is it?" asked Brann.

Marei whispered: "This is... the supply that no one ever wanted to use."

Tilo stared at the sack. "What's in the sack?"

Marei didn't answer immediately. Then she said, so quietly that it was almost only for the stone to hear:

"A piece of the old song."

Fenna felt a shiver. "A... song?"

“Not the melody,” said Marei. “The core. The rhythm. That which holds the work together when everything else wants to fall apart.”

Brann looked at the bottle. "And the powder?"

Marei swallowed. "That's... frost light. Pure. For emergencies. You can use it to briefly clear streams. Like clear air in a smoky room."

Tilo whispered: "That sounds good."

“It sounds good,” said Marei, “because it’s dangerous.”

Fenna carefully took the notebook from the drawer, as if she were touching an animal playing dead. The leather cover was cool. And when Fenna touched it, she felt a tiny resistance, as if the notebook were saying: Not you.

She ignored it. Tonight she ignored many things.

She opened the booklet.

The pages were filled with notes. Handwriting. No cheerful songs. No recipes. They were records. About streams. About knots. About soot. About... Malrik?

Fenna searched for the name. She couldn't find it right away.

But she found a word that frightened her more than any name:

SOURCE.

Underlined.

And below it, an arrow.

And then: “The secret store is just the bandage. The crack lies deeper. Under the heart tree. Under the roots. There, where the old song was broken.”

Fenna looked up. "This is an instruction manual."

Marei nodded slowly. "Or a warning."

Brann growled. "From whom?"

Marei stared at the handwriting. "From someone who was down here before you were born."

Tilo whispered: "And who was that?"

Marei swallowed. "I... think it was Alva."

Fenna felt her stomach clench. "Alva wrote that?"

“Or someone wrote it in her name,” Marei said. “But... the notches. The way she places words. I know that.”

Fenna gripped the notebook tighter. Upstairs, in the Polar Courtyard, Alva had said there was a source. Down here, it was there in black and white. And suddenly, "history" was no longer just a memory, but... a plan.

Fenna looked at the compass again. The currents flickered. The dark pull at the heart tree was stronger, as if someone were tugging at the top of the tree. Time was thinning.

“We must go up,” said Fenna. “With the frost light. And with the core of the song.”

Brann nodded. "And then we'll save the tree."

Marei carefully pulled the sack out of the cupboard. "Or we save the work."

Tilo whispered: "And what if Malrik finds out about this?"

Fenna looked into the darkness behind them, towards where the passage led back.

"He's already found out," said Fenna.

And it was at that exact moment that they heard it.

Not steps.

Not a single vote.

A soft, cheerful whistling sound.

Out of the corridor.

A whistle that hit exactly the wrong note.

Too deep.

The whistling was like a hook digging into Fenna's back.

Not because it was loud. But because it was so... casual. Casualness is the favorite disguise of people who have already won, if you're not careful.

Fenna closed the booklet with a movement that was more protective than orderly. Marei pulled the bag closer to her body, as if it had suddenly gained weight unrelated to the fabric. Brann automatically positioned himself a bit in front of the others, broad, firm, as if his chest could block out any sound. Tilo took a step back—which, in a basement room with a shelf in the middle, meant he bumped into the shelf, which clanged indignantly.

"Tilo," Fenna hissed.

“I... I am quiet!” whispered Tilo, while the whole world had just heard that he wasn’t.

The whistling stopped.

And that was exactly what was worse.

Then a voice came from the corridor. Not close, but close enough that it moved across the room like a cold finger.

"You have found him," said Malrik.

He sounded content. Not angry. Not frantic. Content, as if he had just watched them unwrap a present he himself had cursed.

Fenna held the compass up. The dark current flickered in the glass, as if remembering Malrik's voice.

"You are not here," Fenna said loudly.

"Oh yes," said Malrik. "I'm always where you think you're doing something important."

Marei took a step forward. "How?"

Malrik chuckled softly. "What? Marei, you're really asking that? You know that doors down here respond to beats. And you just played a very interesting beat."

Fenna sensed it immediately. When they opened the door, they had brought the beat into play. And when you bring the beat into play, someone who listens to beats can follow it.

"Damn," Brann muttered.

"Exactly," said Malrik kindly. "Damn it."

His footsteps were now audible. Not fast. Calm. He came closer, as if he were out for a walk and was about to stop somewhere warm.

Fenna looked around. The room had only two exits: the door they had come through and the heavy clerestory door, which now stood open. There was no third way behind the shelf. No back hatch. No escape ladder. Only stone.

"We can't meet him down here," Marei whispered.

"Why not?" Brann whispered. "I can hit him. With my fist."

"You can meet him," Fenna whispered, "but you're not meeting the problem. And we have things we can't let go of."

She looked at the bag. At the bottle of Frostlicht. At the notebook. Things that weren't just objects. Things that made the difference between "we're running blindly again" and "we have a chance."

Fenna felt her mind working, fast, clear. Compass. Currents. Rhythm. Malrik follows the rhythm. So...

"Marei," Fenna whispered. "Can you change the tempo?"

Marei looked at her. "What do you mean?"

Fenna raised the compass. "When you opened it, you linked it to the heart tree. You brought the pulse down. Malrik follows the pulse. If we redirect the pulse..."

Marei understood. Her eyes narrowed. "You want him to follow the wrong pulse."

"I want him to follow a pulse that isn't here," Fenna said.

Brann growled. "And how do we do that?"

Fenna looked at the shelf. At the boxes. At all the things stored down here. Things that carry currents. Things that keep time. Things that have been locked away because they are capable of too much.

"We are making noise," said Fenna.

Tilo gasped. "What?"

"Not acoustic noise," said Fenna. "Electrical noise. Clock noise."

Marei nodded slowly, reluctantly impressed. "Frost light."

Fenna looked at the bottle. "Can it clear the current briefly?"

"And also briefly interrupt," said Marei.

"Then we'll be disturbing them," said Fenna.

Malrik's footsteps were getting closer. Now you could hear the soft scraping of his shoes on the stone. He was almost at the door.

"You don't have much time," Marei whispered.

"I know," Fenna whispered.

She reached for the bottle of Frostlicht. The cork was firmly in place. Fenna pulled, carefully, with control. The cork came loose with a soft pop that sounded louder than a scream in the silence.

At that same moment, the light in the compass flickered.

Malrik paused briefly in the corridor. It was audible. His steps faltered. He had felt it.

"Ah," he said softly. "That's... brave."

Fenna lifted the bottle and didn't pour it. She didn't want to waste it. Frost light was for an emergency. You don't pour an emergency like water.

She dipped two fingers in, just briefly, and withdrew them again. Her fingertips didn't glitter. They glowed dully, as if they had stolen moonlight.

Fenna traced her fingertips across the floor in a quick circle, right in front of the shelf. She wasn't drawing a rune. She was drawing a path. A small circular stream.

The ground reacted. Invisibly. But the compass showed it immediately: The bright streams bent, became clearer, and the dark patches retreated, as if someone had held up a mirror to them.

"Now," Fenna whispered.

Marei stepped forward, placed her hand on the compass, and gave the amulet a slight turn. Her pulse changed. Not much. Just enough.

Brann stood with his legs wide apart in front of the door, his other hand on the shelf, ready.

Tilo held the sack containing the old song so tightly, as if it were a baby that mustn't be dropped. Which was absurd, but on this night, absurdity had long since become commonplace.

The compass vibrated more strongly.

And then something strange happened: The whistling in the corridor could be heard again – but it wasn't Malrik's whistling.

It was an echo. A whistling sound that came from the room itself, as if the new circular current were mimicking and luring away Malrik's signature.

Malrik stepped into the doorway.

Fenna saw him in the lamplight, the splintered beard, the calm eyes. He looked at the room, at the open cupboard, at the empty space where the frosted light now shone.

And then he looked at the ground.

He noticed it.

"Clever," said Malrik. This time without friendliness. Only with respect that tastes like ice cream. "You think you can... change my mind."

"I think you like to follow things," Fenna said.

Malrik smiled. "I only follow what is important."

"Then follow this," said Fenna – and took a step back, deliberately to force him to take a step forward.

Brann yanked the shelf aside at that moment. Not to destroy it, but to reveal the wall behind it. There, partially hidden, was a small access panel. Fenna hadn't seen it before because she hadn't been where her light had fallen.

"There's an exit!" gasped Tilo.

"Of course there's an exit," Brann growled. "There's always one if someone was clever enough to hide it."

Marei whispered: "The compass showed him. Only indirectly."

Fenna realized: The circular current hadn't just disturbed Malrik. It had also made the bright currents so clear that things could be seen that had previously disappeared in the darkness of habit.

Malrik took a step forward.

And then – precisely then – the compass pulse pointed in one direction. Not towards the heart tree. Not towards the corridor. Towards the maintenance hatch.

The false pulse was enticing.

Malrik's eyes flickered for a moment, as if he were actually listening. As if a part of him automatically wanted to follow the current.

Fenna seized this moment.

"Get out!" she hissed.

Tilo squeezed through the maintenance hatch first, his sack pressed tightly to his chest. Brann followed, pulling Marei behind him. Fenna was last, as always, because someone always has to be last, and Fenna had by now accepted that she often was.

She pushed herself into the hatch and pulled it halfway closed behind her.

She saw Malrik standing in the gap, one step too late.

He didn't look angry. He looked... amused. As if Fenna had just given him a new idea.

"Just keep walking," Malrik said quietly through the crack. "I like it when things move. Then you can sort them better."

Fenna slid the flap shut.

Darkness swallowed Malrik's voice.

They crawled through the narrow maintenance passage, higher, faster, panting. The sack with the old song was there. The frost light was there. The booklet was there.

They had the supply.

But Fenna knew: Malrik had received something now too.

He had seen that they had tools.



And Malrik, when he sees tools, doesn't think: Oh no.

Malrik thinks: Thank you.

## Ruby Rednose disappears

When Fenna breathed air again that didn't taste of damp stone and decades-old secrets, the first thing she noticed wasn't the light.

It was the sound.

Upstairs in the factory, everything sounded a touch too high, as if someone had tied the entire North Pole to an invisible string. Footsteps were faster, voices sharper, doors no longer clicked shut but slammed, as if they had to prove they still worked. And somewhere, far in the back, the wrong song still lingered – that one note too low, clinging to your nerves like a crumb of candy cane to the edge of a glove.

They crawled out of the maintenance corridor like three people who don't want to admit they've just slid through the bowels of the world. Brann came out first, as always, as if the narrowness had only briefly bothered his shoulders. Marei slid in behind him, silent and controlled. Fenna came last, pulled the hatch shut, and Tilo squeezed out behind her like a half-melting snowman who's decided to go back out into the sun.

"I was inside," Tilo gasped, "in a... in a tunnel that wasn't even official."

"You survived," Fenna said.

"I've changed," Tilo said with a seriousness usually only heard from people who have eaten a really bad soup. "I will never again in my life... do anything 'just for a short time'."

"That's the most sensible thing you've ever said," Brann murmured.

Fenna clutched the bag containing the old song tightly, as if it were an animal that would vanish the moment it was held too loosely. The frost light bottle clinked in the suitcase. The notebook with the notes lay on top, and just looking at it made her mind race faster than her body would have liked.

"To the heart tree," said Fenna.

"To the heart tree," Marei confirmed.

"To the heart tree," said Tilo, sounding as if it were a place one never wants to go back to, but goes there anyway because one is already so deep in it that turning back would just be another form of panic.

They ran.

And as they walked, Fenna felt something she didn't like: the compass was no longer just vibrating like a tool. It was vibrating like a nervous index finger. The currents within it pulled, trembled, and wavered, as if the device itself no longer knew which rhythm it should obey.

When they reached the Polar Courtyard, Klirr stood at the open entrance like a doorframe that had decided to be human. Her eyes were sharp. Her voice was short.

"Where were you?" she asked.

"Under the roots," Fenna said.

Klirr didn't flinch, but her eyes said: Of course it was you.

Niklas stood by the heart tree. His hand wasn't on the trunk, but he was close enough for Fenna to know she could hear him. The tree was still humming, but the humming was now... choppy. Like a heart trying to stay still while someone pulls on it.

Alva sat on a low box as if she had always sat there. She didn't look surprised; she looked as if she had known all along what Fenna would be carrying.

"You have him," said Alva.

Fenna nodded and held up the sack.

Alva closed her eyes briefly, and for a moment she seemed tired. Then she opened them again, and the tiredness was gone, replaced by the kind of focus that only people possess who have learned long enough that there's no point in being elegant when things are going down.

"And?" asked Niklas.

Fenna lifted the booklet. "Instructions. And a warning. And frost light."

Marei stepped closer. "We can clear the currents. Briefly. Perhaps long enough to recapture the tree before it..."

She didn't finish the sentence because nobody likes to say "cold" when talking about something called Heart Tree.

Klirr kept his gaze fixed on Fenna. "Show me."

Fenna positioned the compass so everyone could see into it. Inside the glass, the dark current wound itself around the roots like a ribbon, and beneath it—deeper—was this knot. No longer just a stain, no longer just a line. A real knot, like a fist of soot.

"There," said Fenna. "That's the source, or close to it."

Alva nodded. "Close."

"We need to get down," Brann said.

"We first need to stabilize the tree," said Marei.

“We need both,” said Fenna.

And just at the moment when Fenna thought that at least for a minute everyone wanted to go in the same direction, an eleven came running up, so fast that his scarf fluttered behind him like a white flag that had long forgotten what it actually stood for.

He almost slipped in the snow, caught himself, and shouted: "Clink! Niklas! Emergency!"

Klirr only turned his head. That was enough for the elf to immediately switch into "report" mode.

"In the reindeer stable... Ruby... Ruby Rednose... he's gone!"

Silence fell.

Not because nobody had anything to say, but because the brain of the North Pole was collectively sorting through the words and none of them fit.

“Away?” Tilo repeated, and his tone was as if someone had told him his bed was optional tonight.

The elf nodded vigorously. "Away. The box is open. The harness is hanging there. The leash is lying there. But Rubin... is not there."

Brann cursed.

Marei turned pale.

Fenna felt her stomach clench. Not with surprise. With realization. Malrik hadn't simply bought them time. He had just thrown them the next spark to make them run again.

"Who noticed?" asked Klirr.

“Stable mistress Runa,” said the eleven. “She says it must have happened minutes ago. Nobody... nobody heard anything.”

“Nobody hears it when everyone has the wrong song in their head,” Alva muttered.

Niklas' face became even calmer, which for him always meant: This is serious.

“Rubin doesn’t just disappear,” said Niklas.

“No,” said Fenna. “He will be made to disappear.”

Klirr looked sharply at Fenna. “Malrick.”

Fenna nodded.

"He doesn't need a sled if he doesn't want to start the sled," Marei said quietly. "He needs Ruby."

"And he knows how much the work is tied to Rubin," Alva said. "Not just because of the nose. Because of the symbolism. Because people would rather believe in a red nose than in their own responsibility."

Tilo swallowed. "That sounds... very logical and very bad."

"That's Malrik's favorite combination," said Fenna.

Klirr turned to the guards. "Lock it down. Reindeer stable. All doors. No single paths. Nobody goes alone."

The guards nodded and ran.

"I'll go with you," said Brann.

"Me too," Fenna said immediately.

Klirr looked at the bag in Fenna's arms. "You're not leaving without this."

"Then it will come along," said Fenna.

Niklas looked at her, and in his gaze was something Fenna hadn't often seen in him: a hint of worry that didn't take time to hide.

"If Rubin is gone," Niklas said quietly, "everything will descend into panic. And in panic..."

"...scapegoats always find new necks," Fenna concluded.

Alva slowly stood up, as if she were unstuck from an old chair that had held her stories for too long. "Then we'll do it differently this time," she said.

"How?" asked Tilo, and his voice trembled.

Alva looked at him. "This time we won't just drift along. This time we'll hold fast to what is true."

Fenna felt the compass in her hand. It vibrated more intensely, and when she looked into it, she saw something that made her throat tighten:

A bright stream shot away from the heart tree.

Not to the factory buildings.

Not to the camps.

To the reindeer stable.

And right in the middle, like a black thorn: a thin dark line that moved.

"He's already on his way," Fenna whispered.

Klirr was already moving. "Then we'll run," she said. "And this time we'll run towards him."

They ran off – through the polar courtyard, through the corridors, past elves who stepped out of doors in fright and immediately disappeared again, because fear at the North Pole is like snow: it doesn't stay anywhere, it spreads out.

And while Fenna ran, she thought of Rubin.

I remember the warm snorts you sometimes hear when you walk past the barn late at night. The red nose that more than once found its way out when the dome lights flickered. The feeling that an animal that seems so friendly should still not be used as a tool.

Malrik had used him.

And Malrik was the kind of person who preferred to destroy things that seemed friendly, because it proved to him that kindness doesn't win.

Fenna ran faster.

The reindeer stable was normally a place where even the most stressed elves automatically slowed down.

Not because there was a rule, but because animals don't respect haste. If you run into a barn, a reindeer will look at you as if it's just decided you're not quite right in the head. Those looks work. They're better than any sign.

They were ineffective today.

Today the stable was a disturbed nest of voices, straw, and breath. Elves were everywhere, the kind who usually act as if reindeer were perfectly normal colleagues, but now realized that "colleague" could suddenly mean "absent." Runa, the stable manager, stood in the middle of the aisle between the stalls like a storm incarnate. Her hair had slipped out of her cap, her cheeks red, not from cold, but from anger.

"No one goes in!" she barked. "I don't want any footprints in my straw!"

A few elves pulled their feet back as if Runa had just told them the ground was hot.

A clatter sounded, like a knife left in a pocket for too long. "Runa," she said.

Runa turned around, saw Klirr – and her face didn't relax an inch. Runa wasn't the kind of elf who was impressed by authority. She was only impressed by competence. Klirr had a chance.

"He's gone," Runa said, as if "he" were a word one shouldn't utter. "Rubin is gone. And I swear to you, Klirr, if anyone has been using my animals as toys—"

"We will find him," said Klirr.

Runa laughed briefly, harshly. "Yes. And then?"

Klirr didn't answer. Klirr wasn't responsible for "then" either. Klirr was responsible for "now".

Fenna stepped beside Klirr, clutching the star compass. The stable smelled of hay and warm fur, and a little of the sweet feed mixtures they were given to make them look happy. Today, there was a sharp, metallic note in the scent.

"Show me the box," Fenna said to Runa.

Runa glanced at Fenna briefly – and her gaze immediately conveyed: You're the one they're talking about. But Runa wasn't the type to post on a bulletin board. She was the "what's the problem?" type.

"There," she said succinctly, pointing to a box at the edge.

Fenna went over. The stall was open. The harness hung on the wall, neatly arranged, as if someone had deliberately left it untouched. The lead lay on the floor, half-buried in the straw.

Fenna knelt down, shining a low light.

No wild tracks. No struggle. No panicked rummaging.

That was the first thing that frightened her: Rubin wasn't cunning. Rubin had been... led.

Marei stepped next to Fenna and looked around. "That's too clean."

Brann growled. "Or someone did a clean job."

Tilo stood behind them, trying not to step on the straw, which made him look like a very poorly disguised burglar.

Fenna held the compass over the rope. Bright streams shot through the glass along the stable aisles – the animals, the warmth, life. And in between: a dark trail, thin, fluid, like a thread of soot.

She led the way out of the box.

"That way," said Fenna.

Klirr stepped closer. "Are you sure?"

Fenna nodded. "As sure as you can be when you're chasing a shadow."

Runa approached, staring at the compass as if she'd just been shown that air can also be a map. "What is this?"

"A tool," said Fenna.

Runa almost spat into the snow. "Then use it. And if it takes you somewhere Rubin isn't, then I'll personally show you how to really leave tracks in a stable."

"That will be motivating," Tilo murmured.

They followed the dark trail.

It didn't lead outside, not into the cold. That would be too obvious. The trail led through the stable, past the other stalls where the reindeer snorted and pawed nervously. Some animals were restless, as if they knew part of the herd was missing. Animals know such things faster than elves.

At the end of the stable corridor was a door that led into a feed room.

Runa yanked them open before Klirr could say anything. "This is my territory," she growled, and it sounded like: I am the authority, no matter what you think.

The feeding room smelled of grain, apple pieces, and a hint of peppermint. Normally soothing. Today it was just another place where Rubin wasn't.

Fenna held up the compass. The trail continued. It led to a shelf where sacks of feed were stacked.

And there, between two sacks, was a small flap in the floor.

Runa stopped. Her eyes narrowed. "I don't know her."

"That's bad," said Klirr.

"This is very bad," said Brann, and that was his way of sounding the alarm.

Fenna knelt down and shone her light on the flap. It was made of wood, clean, with hardly any dust. Someone had used it recently. And at the edge, Fenna saw a tiny notch in the floor – an imprint, a mark, like a boot tread.

"Jaro," Fenna murmured.

There was a soft, rumbling sound, and with that kind of noise, it was almost a curse.

"The helper," said Marei.

"Or someone who likes his shoes," said Tilo, but nobody laughed.

Fenna pulled on the ring of the hatch. It wasn't locked. It opened too easily.

There was a ladder leading down underneath.

"No," Runa said immediately. "No, no. Not another underground. Not another secret cellar. I have animals. I have no patience for... underworlds."

Klirr looked at her. "You want a ruby?"

Runa gritted her teeth. "Yes."

"Then go down," said Klirr.

Brann went first, as always. Fenna followed, the compass close to her body. Marei came behind. Tilo hesitated – and then a noise was heard above, sounding like a panicked neigh, only more reindeer-like.

Tilo swallowed and climbed.

Down below, it wasn't as old as under the heart-shaped tree. The walls were wood and rough stone, new enough that you could still smell nails. A tunnel that had clearly been built later. Not part of the old North Pole, but part of a more recent... idea.

"This is a smuggling operation," Brann muttered.

"Or an act of sabotage," said Fenna.

The compass clearly showed the trail. It continued, growing stronger. Darker. As if someone had freshly drawn the soot line.

They walked quickly, crouching low, through the tunnel. There were side passages, small alcoves, boxes. Everything looked like it was only meant to be temporary. But at the North Pole, short-term things often turn into very long-term arrangements.

Then they heard it.

A snort.

Warm.

Close.

Fenna stopped, holding the lamp still.

In the semi-darkness, before them, was a room. Not large. But in the room stood a box, improvised from wooden beams. And in that box: a ruby.

He stood there, ears pricked, red nose hunched, as if the light had been taken away. His fur was unruly, his eyes wide. He wasn't injured. But he was bound. Not roughly, not brutally. With knots tied by a skilled craftsman.

"Ruby," Fenna whispered, and the word sounded like a relief that didn't dare to be loud.

Runa, who had protested upstairs, was suddenly behind them and pushing forward, and Fenna didn't know how she had managed it, but if you take away a stable master's most important thing, he becomes amazingly agile.

"My boy," whispered Runa.

Rubin snorted softly, as if answering.

Fenna took a step closer. The compass vibrated. The dark line in the glass was no longer just a line. It lay like a shadow over the box.



"This is a trap," Marei said quietly.

"Of course it's a trap," Brann growled. "He lets us find what we're looking for. That's Malrik's style."

Tilo whispered: "And what happens now?"

Fenna looked around.

A small sign hung on the wall of the room.

Neatly written, with a neat hand.

UNDER IT: A LETTER.

A letter, held in place with a nail, as if it were an invitation to a very bad party.

Fenna went to the letter.

She knew she shouldn't.

She did it anyway.

The letter was on thick paper. And on it, in handwriting too neat to be accidental, was written:

"If you want the ruby, bring me the sack."

Fenna felt her blood turn cold.

The sack.

The same old story.

Malrik knew it.

Malrik wanted it.

And Malrik had just shown them that he was ready to trade in warm, living things.

There were moments when words were heavier than iron.

"Bring me the bag" was one such moment.

Fenna held the letter in her hand, and the paper felt like a glove pulled over a blade. The room was silent except for Rubin's unsteady breathing. The reindeer snorted, as if asking why the world suddenly smelled so strange.

Runa took a step towards Fenna. Her gaze wasn't on the compass, not on Brann, not on Marei. It was only on the letter.

"What does it say?" she asked, even though she already knew. You can recognize such messages by the way people suddenly blink less.

Fenna didn't hand her the letter. She read it aloud. Her voice was calm because she knew: if her voice trembled, the room would tremble.

When she was finished, Runa's face didn't turn pale. It turned dark.

"He wants to take action," said Runa, and she sounded as if she were about to teach someone a lesson with a shovel.

"He wants to divide us," said Marei.

"He wants the core of the song," said Fenna.

Brann growled. "Then he won't get him. I'm getting Rubin out of here now."

Fenna held up a hand. "Wait."

Brann looked at her as if Fenna had just suggested that one should politely listen to a bear first. "Wait? It's an animal. It's scared."

Rubin snorted in confirmation, as if he understood that this was about him, and he agreed with "fear".

"I know," said Fenna. "But if we simply go and untie the knots, Malrik might untie something else. A door. A beam. A current."

Tilo stared at the letter as if the paper had just slapped him. "He's everywhere," he whispered. "He's... like a cough in a silent room."

"A pretty picture," Marei murmured. "And yes."

Fenna looked around. The room was too clean. The knots on Rubin's bonds were too neat. The box was sturdy enough that Rubin couldn't escape, but not so sturdy that it couldn't have been built quickly. Everything seemed planned. And with Malrik, planning was always a sign: I've got another layer in the works.

"The letter is not the trap," Fenna said. "Ruby is the trap."

Runa made a noise that was almost a growl. "You say that as if he were... a thing."

"No," said Fenna. "I say it this way because Malrik is using him as an object. And I don't want us to make it easier for him."

Brann stepped closer to the box. Rubin raised his head, and his nose glowed a little brighter, as if the animal had decided that it wanted to shine for its own sake. There was something defiant in that red glow. Rubin wasn't just a symbol. Rubin was also a reindeer, and reindeer are stubborn.

"I can untie the knots," said Runa.

Marei raised a hand. "No. Not with bare hands."

"Why?" Runa snarled.

Marei pointed to the compass. "Do you see the dark line? It lies on the knots. It has dusted them. Not much. Just enough that—"

"...that you will get angry," Fenna said softly.

Runa froze.

Fenna sensed how delicate this was. You don't say to a stable mistress, "You're easily manipulated." You say that when you want to die. But Fenna said it anyway, because it was true.

"He wants you to hate him," Fenna said. "For you to grab someone. For you to make a mistake. And then he can say: See? The stable hands are hysterical. They hurt Rubin. It's their fault."

Runa swallowed. Her anger was still there, but it was cracking. Not because she was any less angry, but because she suddenly realized that her anger was being used.

"I don't hurt my animal," she said tonelessly.

"Exactly," said Fenna. "So we'll do it in a controlled manner."

Brann took a deep breath, and Fenna saw him open and close his hands as if he had to channel his impulses into work.

"How?" asked Brann.

Fenna reached into the suitcase and took out the bottle of frost light. It was half full. It wasn't much. But it was enough for a moment of clarity.

"We'll sort out the knots," said Fenna. "Just a moment. Then we'll untie them. Then we'll leave. Quickly."

Marei nodded. "And we won't lose sight of the rhythm. The heart tree—"

"—has no time for reindeer drama," Tilo muttered.

Runa glared at him. Tilo threw up his hands. "I mean... the reindeer is important. But the tree is important too. I... I can find two things panicky at the same time."

Fenna didn't pull the cork out of the frost light bottle all the way, just a little. She didn't want to lose any scent, any energy. She dipped her fingertips in, just like she had down in the storeroom, and this time very gently stroked the knots on Rubin's bonds, without untying them.

She immediately felt the resistance. It was as if the air around the knots briefly thickened, as if something invisible contracted and said: No. This is mine.

The compass vibrated, and the dark line in the glass contracted, becoming thinner, as if its food were being taken away.

"Now," Fenna whispered.

Brann knelt down, took a small knife from his pocket – a workshop knife, nothing dramatic, just sharp because it was needed – and instead of cutting the knots, he untied them with the patient precision of someone who has often untangled things that look worse than they are.

Rubin trembled, but he remained silent, as if he understood that noise was dangerous down here.

Runa held Rubin's head gently, speaking softly to him. No grand words. Just the kind of sounds animals understand: I am here. You are not alone. Breathe.

Fenna felt the film of frost light on her fingertips slowly fade. Time windows close faster and faster when you need them.

Brann untied the last knot.

Rubin was free.

The moment Rubin was free, he did something that both relieved and frightened Fenna: he stamped his foot firmly on the ground.

A reindeer's stomp isn't like a kick. It's a statement.

The floor vibrated. Dust trickled from the ceiling. And somewhere in the tunnel, a faint clicking sound could be heard.

Fenna froze. "That's it," she whispered.

"What?" asked Tilo.

"The trigger," said Marei.

Runa grabbed Rubin by the harness. "We're leaving!"

"Where to?" Tilo shouted.

"Upwards!" growled Brann.

They pushed out of the room, Rubin in front, Runa beside him, Brann behind them, Fenna with the compass, Marei quiet as ever. They ran back through the tunnel, and Fenna heard a noise behind them that she didn't like:

A soft rustling sound.

Like snow.

Except there was no snow down here.

Then a crackling sound.

And one more thing.

"The ceiling!" Tilo shouted.

Brann cursed and pushed. Runa pulled Rubin. Rubin ran as fast as he could, and his nose now shone brightly, as if the animal had decided it must be its own lantern.

Something broke behind them.

A beam.

Then one more.

The tunnel began to work like a bad thought: first slowly, then suddenly.

Fenna ran, and in the compass she saw the dark line stretching out behind them, as if Malrik wasn't following behind himself, but sending the space.

They reached the ladder hatch in the feed room.

Brann jumped up first, flinging open the hatch. Runa pushed Rubin up, and excited voices could immediately be heard in the barn above, because a reindeer suddenly emerging from the ground is not something most people consider a "normal workday".

Fenna climbed up, Marei followed, Tilo last, panting, cursing, alive.

When Tilo was upstairs, Brann slammed the hatch shut.

A dull thud from below.

Then silence.

Only Rubin's breath. And the sound of elves suddenly remembering they need to breathe again.

Runa rested her forehead against Rubin's neck. For a moment, she wasn't a stable master. She was simply someone who had her animal back.

Then she raised her head. Her gaze was hard.

"He wants the bag," she said.

Fenna nodded. "Yes."

Runa spat, not literally, more emotionally. "Then he won't get him. But we have to find him."

Marei looked at Fenna. "He showed us that he can take something we love at any time."

Fenna felt her stomach tighten. "And we showed him that we weren't paying immediately."

"That makes him more dangerous," said Marei.

"He was dangerous," Tilo muttered.

Fenna looked towards the stable exit. Outside was the Polar Farm. The Heart Tree. The Knot. The Spring.

Malrik had taken Ruby from them to make them run. They had retrieved Ruby – and lost a tunnel in the process, which Malrik presumably considered a bonus.

And somewhere, while they were standing there, the heart tree may have grown colder.

Fenna closed her hand around the sack under her arm.

"We're going back," she said.

"To the tree," said Marei.

"To the tree," said Brann.

Runa stroked Rubin's nose once, then looked at Fenna. "If you need Rubin again," she said, "ask me. Not the world. The world is stupid."

Fenna nodded. "Deal."

They set off again – this time with Rubin behind a safe door, but with a new weight in their minds: Malrik was no longer just playing with labels and songs.

He played with what hurts.

And the work... still sang wrong.

## Ransom demands

A stable is a place where people convince themselves that warmth is enough.

Warmth, hay, fur, a little peppermint in the feed – it all seems like a world of its own. But as soon as Fenna ran back down the corridor towards the Polar Farm, she realized that warmth alone doesn't heal anything if the rhythm is wrong.

Voices echoed through the factory. Not many at once, but too many in too short intervals. Elves were everywhere, and almost everyone was carrying something: boxes, tools, stacks of paper, a lantern that seemed so urgent, as if it were about to start writing an emergency report. The notice board in the main corridor was surrounded. People were gesturing. They were whispering. The wrong song seemed to be drifting through the corridors like a rumor that never takes off its shoes.

Klirr had redistributed the paths. Guards now stood at corners that had only been corners yesterday. And yet it felt as if Malrik could slip through anywhere, because Malrik doesn't go through doors – he goes through gaps in the mind.

Fenna reached the Polar Farm and immediately saw: The Heart Tree was worse.

Not dramatically worse, not "tree falling" worse. But as bad as a candle flickering even though there's no wind. The humming was quieter, more restless, and the light that usually glimmers in the trunk like a warm breath was faint.

Niklas was standing there again, his gaze fixed on the tree trunk as if trying to keep it warm with sheer stubbornness. Alva was still there, the scarf around her shoulders, her eyes so alert that tiredness apparently had no place. Marei stepped up to Fenna's side without saying a word. Brann followed. Tilo too, with the kind of breath that says: I've run more today than in my entire life. Please let me sit down again sometime.

"Rubin is back," said Fenna.

Niklas nodded without taking his eyes off the tree. "Good."

"The tunnel is gone," said Brann.

Niklas' jaw tensed. "Not good."

A clattering sound came from a side aisle, and it was clear she had made more decisions in the last hour than others do in a whole year. "He found you," she said, not as a question.

Fenna nodded. "And he made a demand."

Alva raised her head. "The sack."

Fenna felt a sting. "Yes."

"Of course," Alva said softly. "He wants the old song. He wants the core. Because if you have the core, you can change the work..." She searched for the word, found it with a small, bitter smile. "...change their mind."

Klirr looked at Fenna. "What exactly did the letter say?"

Fenna pulled out the letter and handed it to Klirr. Klirr read quickly, without expression. Then she folded it neatly, as if she were going to paste it into a report later. Fenna knew: Klirr doesn't paste anything. Klirr collects evidence like other people collect screws.

"He wants trade," said Klirr.

"He wants control," said Marei.

"And he wants us to leave the tree alone," Brann said.

As if the cue had been given, the heart tree hummed once more deeply, and the sound was so tired that Fenna briefly thought of a large animal gasping for air in its sleep.

“How much time?” Fenna asked, addressing the tree more than the people.

Marei held up the compass and looked into it. "Not much. The knot is still pulling into the roots."

Alva nodded. "And when he's deep enough inside, you'll need more than Frostlight. Then you'll need..." She broke off, as if she hadn't wanted to say the word.

"What?" asked Tilo.

Alva looked at him. "Courage that doesn't shine."

Tilo swallowed. "I have... candy cane courage."

"That's what counts," Alva said dryly.

Klirr exhaled. "We need a plan," she said. "And we need information. Where does he want the bag? When? How?"

The answer was a noise from above.

A small ringing sound.

Not the cheerful jingle of bells. A ringing reminiscent of metal, of clanging against metal, as if someone wanted to remind the world that it can also be hard.

Everyone looked up. A small package fell from an opening in the dome support and landed in the snow of the Polar Courtyard.

It wasn't big. But it was... clearly intentional. Someone had placed it so that it could fall right here, right now.

Brann went over and carefully picked it up. It was wrapped in gray paper with a red ribbon. The red ribbon looked like Christmas decoration, but Fenna saw immediately: it wasn't a ribbon. It was a string. Tight. Functional. Too tight.

“Do not open,” Marei said at the same time as Fenna.

Brann paused. “I just wanted to...”

"Do not open," Klirr repeated.

Brann placed the package in the snow as if it were a snow snake about to bite.

Fenna knelt down and held the compass over the water. The currents flickered. A small dark stain clung to the package, like a soot seal.

"He pollinated it," Marei murmured.

“Of course,” said Alva.



"Then we won't open it here," said Klirr.

"We need to know what's in it," Brann said.

"Above all, we need to know what he wants us to feel when we see it," Fenna said.

Klirr nodded, and it was clear: that was the difference between "I am strong" and "I am clever." Klirr was both, but she preferred clever.

"Take it to the quarantine room," Klirr told two guards. "No direct contact. Tongs. Gloves. And if it sings, throw it out."

The guards nodded and carried it away as if they were carrying a bomb that was making fun of Christmas.

They followed, through the corridors, to a small room that was originally meant for broken music boxes—but now served as a place for things one wouldn't want anywhere near one's heart. The door clanged shut, and Fenna saw: it was one of those rooms where even the air is wary.

They opened the package with pliers.

There was no explosive device inside.

No poison.

Inside was... a bell.

A small reindeer bell, like the kind that hangs on harnesses. But it wasn't Rubin's. It was too new, too clean, too cold.

There was a note attached to the bell.

Klirr took it off with gloves, read, and her face remained calm.

"What does it say?" Brann asked.

Klirr handed the note to Fenna.

Fenna read:

"Your reindeer is back. How kind. I'll be fair if you're fair. Take the sack to the old bell tower at midnight. Come unsupervised. Without inspectors. Without heroes. Otherwise, next time something will disappear that you can't get back."

Fenna felt her stomach tighten.

Midnight.

A place.

One condition.

And a threat that wasn't directed at Rubin – but at something bigger. Something that Malrik considered truly effective.

“Old bell tower,” Tilo murmured. “We have... a bell tower?”

“We have things we don’t like to mention,” Alva said.

Klirr looked at Fenna. “Midnight is near.”

Fenna nodded. "He's forcing us to make a choice."

"Bag or tree," Marei said quietly.

"Or a sack and a tree, if we're smart," said Fenna.

Brann growled. "And if we give him the bag, it's all over."

Alva slowly raised her head. "If you give him the sack," she said, "he can rewrite the rhythm. And then Christmas won't just be ruined. Then it will be... something else."

Fenna held the note tightly. Paper, so harmless, yet so dangerous.

"Then we won't give it to him," said Fenna.

Klirr looked at her. "And what are we doing at midnight?"

Fenna looked at the star compass, at the flickering currents, and at the dark knot pulling on the tree.

“We’re going there,” Fenna said. “But we’re not bringing what he wants. We’re bringing what he doesn’t expect.”

What Malrik doesn't expect, Fenna thought, is never anything particularly shiny.

Malrik expected glamour. He expected panic. He expected people to display the wrong kind of courage—the kind that looks big but doesn't last. And he expected them to either give him the boot or try to "confront" him, which, with Malrik, is about as effective as a snowball fight against a fireplace.

So they needed something that didn't reek of heroism, but of craftsmanship.

They were still standing in the quarantine room, the bell lying on the table like an accusation. The note next to it. The air was dry, and yet everything felt damp with tension.

Klirr tapped the sentence "Comes unsupervised" with a gloved finger. "That's his attempt to keep me out."

"Because you won't be able to entertain him," said Tilo.

"Because you won't admire him," Alva said.

"Because she won't let him," Brann said.

Klirr dropped his finger. "He wants control of the space. Of the stage."

Marei looked at Fenna. "You still want to leave."

"Yes," said Fenna. "Not because he says so. Because otherwise we'll remain blind. He'll keep playing anyway. If we don't go, he'll choose the next shot."

"And he clearly said that he's making something disappear that we can't get back," Tilo murmured.

Alva nodded. "This is not an empty threat."

Fenna thought briefly of the heart tree. Of the spring. Of the old song in the sack. What could Malrik take that would be worse than Rubin? The work contains many things. But there are things you can't find again when they're gone: trust, rhythm, the direction of the night.

"We have to stabilize the tree at the same time," said Marei. "And we have to operate the tower."

"Then we'll split up," said Brann.

Klirr looked at him. "That's what he wants."

"Then we will divide ourselves differently than he thinks," said Fenna.

She pulled the notebook from the suitcase – Alva's old notes, the leather one with the knot. On the table, it looked even more menacing, because a book in a quarantine room automatically looks like evidence.

Fenna opened the book to the page marked "SOURCE." The arrow. The note about the supply as a bandage. And below it, another line that Fenna had only half understood in the darkness:

"When the core gets cold, frost light can clarify – but only if someone applies the old song like a bandage."

Fenna read it aloud.

Silence.

Brann growled. "Apply it like a bandage?"

Marei frowned. "That means... you don't have to give the song's essence. You have to use it."

Alva nodded slowly, as if she had been waiting for this very moment. "Yes," she said. "And that's why he wants it. Not as a trophy. As a tool."

"Can we use him without Malrik noticing?" Klirr asked.

Marei shook her head. "Currents are not private. If we use the core, the rhythm becomes clearer. Malrik senses this. He will know that we are no longer just carrying him, but using him."

"Good," said Fenna. "Then he'll feel it."

Tilo stared at her. "That doesn't sound good."

"It's good," said Fenna, "because it forces him to react. And reactions are less elegant than plans."

Klirr folded his arms. "So: We'll stabilize the heart tree with the old song and frost light."

"Yes," said Fenna.

"And you go to the bell tower," said Klirr.

"Yes," Fenna said again.

Brann raised his hand. "And I'll go with you."

"You're coming along," Fenna confirmed. "But not as a hammer. As a shield."

Brann looked briefly offended, but decided to nod because a shield is still better than nothing.

Tilo tentatively raised two fingers. "And me?"

Fenna looked at him. "You stay with Marei and Alva by the tree."

Tilo froze. "What? No! I... I'm excellent at running away. But only if I can actually run somewhere. If I'm supposed to stay by a tree that's buzzing..."

"That's exactly why you're staying," Alva said dryly. "You're afraid. Fear is attentive. Courage is often foolish."

Tilo swallowed. "Thank you?"

"Gladly," said Alva.

Klirr nodded. "I'm coordinating up top. I'm making sure nobody disturbs the tree area. And I'm making sure Malrik doesn't suddenly find another scapegoat."

"And Malrik?" asked Brann.

Klirr didn't smile. But there was something in her eyes that Fenna now recognized as "the joy of the right moment." "When Malrik shows up, he's accompanied."

"From you?" Tilo asked.

"From everyone," said Klirr.

Fenna looked at the bell. "What's wrong with this bell?"

Marei stepped closer. "This is a message. And an anchor. Bells are... timekeepers."

"He wants us to bring the rhythm to the tower," said Fenna.

"Or he wants us to believe that he wants that," Marei said.

Alva raised her hand. "The bell tower is old," she said. "It used to be part of the workshop. Up there, they led the shift song. When Malrik stands there at midnight, he doesn't just want to trade. He wants to... tune."

Fenna felt a shiver run down his spine. "He wants to rewrite the rhythm."

"Or at least disrupt it," said Marei.

"Then he must not be there alone," Brann said.

"He will not be alone," Fenna said. "Not with us. And not with what we have."

She looked at Klirr. "We're not taking the bag with us."

Klirr raised an eyebrow. "You're leaving without what he demands?"

"I'm going with something else," Fenna said.

She took the bell from the table and held it in her hand. It was cold. Too cold for a bell that supposedly came from the stable. And it was new. Too new.

"We will go with the bell," said Fenna.

Marei nodded slowly. "You want to use his own message."

"I want to use his platform," Fenna said.

Tilo swallowed. "And what if he gets angry?"

Fenna looked at him. "Then he's no longer elegant."

Brann grunted in agreement. "And if it's not elegant, I can finally get back to being more practical."

Alva gave Fenna a quick pat on the shoulder. Not affectionately. More like a mechanic saying: That's it.

"Be careful," said Alva.

Fenna nodded. "You too."

They finalized the plan in their minds, as best as one can finalize a plan when time is running out.

And then, as Fenna put the bell away and was about to set off, the compass in Marei's hands suddenly vibrated more strongly.

Marei held it up and stared into it.

"What?" asked Fenna.

Marei swallowed. "The dark stream..."

"What about him?" Brann asked.

Marei looked up. "He's moving. Not just at the tree. He's spreading out."

Alva went to the compass, bent down, and her eyes narrowed.

"He's no longer just pulling himself into the roots," Alva said. "He's going... into the air."

Fenna felt her heart race. "Up into the air?"

Marei nodded. "Into the dome. Into the conduits. Into the lights. He will be... lighter."

"Then he'll be everywhere," Tilo whispered.

"And then midnight isn't just a meeting," Alva said. "Then midnight is a switch."

Fenna clutched the bell. "Then we'll go now," she said.

Klirr nodded. "And we won't waste a minute."

They stepped back out into the factory, into the hallway, into the noise, into the wrong song. Fenna went ahead, Brann behind her. Klirr stayed behind to secure the side of the tree. Marei, Alva, and Tilo went to the Polar Farm.

As Fenna turned around, she saw the heart tree once more. Its humming was faint. But somewhere deep inside, in a rhythm you only feel when you're afraid, it continued to beat.

And Fenna thought: Hang in there. We'll bring your song back to you soon.

Then she turned away.

To the old bell tower.

To Malrik.

At midnight, which suddenly lay like a knife on the schedule.

The old bell tower was one of those places that exist in the work like a family member that no one talks about because it once said something inappropriate at a party, and since then everyone pretends it's just a strange shadow in the corner of their eye.

He stood not far from the main building, but far enough that the corridors leading there smelled different. Less sawdust, more cold drafts. Less laughter, more footsteps listening to themselves. Fenna and Brann walked through a narrow connecting corridor that had apparently once been intended as an official route, but was now more the kind of path you take when you don't want anyone to know you're there.

The bell in Fenna's pocket felt as if it were constantly recalculating its own weight. Not heavy, not light – more like awake.

"He set a clock for us," Brann growled.

"He built us a stage," said Fenna.

"Both are bad."

"Yes," said Fenna. "But stage also means: light. And light means that he can't be everywhere at once without being seen."

Brann snorted. "You really think Malrik is bothered by being seen."

Fenna thought of Malrik's smile in the pantry, the way he viewed the world as a shelf. "He doesn't mind being seen," she said. "He minds when people don't react the way he planned."

They reached a door made of old wood, once varnished, which now only pretended to have a shine. Beside it hung a sign, half crooked, half serious: Bell Tower – Access for Maintenance Only. Below, in chalk, in a more recent handwriting, was an addendum: and for people who know what they're doing.

"That's humorous," Fenna murmured.

Brann placed his hand on the doorknob. It was cold. And a little damp, as if the door had just been sweating.

"He's already in," said Brann.

Fenna raised the star compass. In the glass, the currents moved thinly and restlessly. No large dark knot like at the Heart Tree, but here there was something different: a kind of ring, moving in a circle, as if the place itself were waiting for something.

"Not directly inside," said Fenna. "But close."

Brann pushed open the door.

Inside, there was a kind of silence that only old rooms can possess. Not an empty silence, but a silence filled with memories of things that once happened. Wood creaked, even though no one stepped on it. Somewhere, water dripped, slowly and calmly, as if it possessed its own sense of time.

A staircase led upwards, spiraling, narrow, and Fenna immediately felt this irrational impulse: If you go upwards, you will become smaller because everything around you will become larger.

They left.

With every step upwards, the air grew colder. And the false song, which had circulated like a rumor through the corridors down in the factory, no longer sounded like a rumor up here, but like an echo. As if the tower were reflecting it back, amplified, but wrong.

"I hate towers," Brann muttered.

"You hate many things," said Fenna.

"Towers deserve it."

At the top, the staircase opened into a room with beams, ropes, and a large metal wheel that had once rung the bell. The bell itself hung above it, massive and dark, with a clapper that looked like a judgment.

The room was empty.

Of course it was empty. Malrik wouldn't be standing in the middle of the room waving. Malrik wasn't a villain from a children's book. Malrik was the kind of villain who steals your children's book and then gives it back, but with the pages switched so you'd blame yourself if the story wasn't true.

Fenna slowly entered the room. Brann stayed a step behind her, so that he could see the stairs and everything else at the same time.

"He wants you to think he's coming later," Brann said.

"He wants me to think I'm in control," Fenna said.

She pulled the small bell from her pocket. She held it in her hand, and for a moment the image didn't quite fit: a small reindeer bell beneath a huge tower bell, as if someone had decided that size relationships were a lie.

"What are you doing?" Brann asked.

Fenna held the compass in her other hand. "We're listening."

"I can't hear anything," Brann growled.

"You hear with your ears," said Fenna. "I try to do it with... the rest."

She closed her eyes briefly.

And indeed: there was something. A very subtle rhythm, like a pulse, that didn't belong to the tower. Not the heart tree. Something else. Something that hid in the ropes and beams like a thought you can't shake.

Fenna opened her eyes and looked at the wall.

There was a new note hanging there.



It wasn't big. But it was so neatly placed that it was almost insulting. Someone had even used a small thumbtack. Malrik had style.

Fenna went over. Brann growled, but held back.

The note read:

"Midnight is a very good word. It sounds like an end. But it's usually a beginning. Put the bell down. Then we'll talk."

Fenna stared at the sentence. Brann stepped beside her. "He's here," he said.

"Yes," said Fenna.

And as if on cue, a soft clacking sound came from the shadows between the beams. Not a footstep. A small noise, like putting on a glove. Or closing a small box.

"You are on time," said Malrik's voice.

She didn't come from one corner. She came from everywhere. The tower turned voices into things that couldn't be pinned down.

Fenna turned slowly. "You didn't keep Ruby."

"I am not a monster," said Malrik.

"Yes," Brann growled.

Malrik laughed softly. "That's a big word coming from a big mouth. And yet... you're just the muscle. She's the problem."

Fenna sensed how he meant her, and that was worse than any insult: Malrik took her seriously.

"Where are you?" asked Fenna.

"Here," said Malrik. And then he actually stepped out of the shadows. Not dramatically, not with his coat billowing. He simply stepped forward, as if he had been standing there all along, just waiting for them to turn their eyes in the right place.

He looked as usual. Clean. Neat. His splintered beard, in the cold light of the tower lamp, looked like a wreath of small, nasty icicles.

"You have read my letter," said Malrik.

"Yes," said Fenna.

"And you ignored him," said Malrik.

Fenna lifted the small bell. "I interpreted it."

Malrik inclined his head. "Interpretation is dangerous. One could almost believe you're thinking."

"Yes," said Fenna. "That's my new hobby today."

Malrik smiled thinly. "And where is the bag?"

"Not here," said Fenna.

Brann took a half step forward, just to show that he was there.

Malrik didn't look at him. "Of course not. You're afraid to give him to me."

"No," said Fenna. "I'm afraid of using it incorrectly. You're not."

Malrik's eyes sharpened slightly. "That's almost clever."

Fenna held up the small bell. "Why this bell?"

"Because you understand bells," said Malrik. "You understand rhythm. You understand the start of a shift. You understand 'now'. Bells make time something you can hear. And I wanted you to hear time."

Fenna felt her neck stiffen. "Midnight."

"Midnight," Malrik repeated, looking up at the large bell. "One note. And then... a new song."

Fenna looked at the compass. The currents flickered. The dark ring up here had grown stronger since Malrik had appeared. It was as if he had hung the tower on himself like a jacket.

"You want to tune the tower," said Fenna.

"I want to free the tower," said Malrik.

"You want to destroy the work," Brann said.

Malrik laughed softly. "Destruction is so final. I just want it to stop lying to itself."

Fenna felt anger rising within her. Not the wavering kind that feeds Malrik. A clear, unfiltered anger. The kind that says: You talk a good game, but you make things ugly.

"You feed soot," said Fenna. "You poison songs. You kidnap animals. And then you call it truth."

Malrik's gaze remained calm. "Truth is rarely nice."

"But it doesn't have to be cruel," said Fenna.

For a moment, just a fleeting impression, Malrik seemed tired. Or perhaps he was feigning it. With Malrik, both were possible.

“Give me the bag,” he said then, without any poetry. “Or I’ll take something else. Something you can’t find again in a tunnel. Something you can’t take out of a box.”

Fenna held his gaze. "What?"

Malrik smiled. "You'll hear about that at midnight."

Fenna felt the tower around her grow heavier. As if it were straightening up. As if it were listening.

"You want me to be scared," Fenna said.

"I want you to vote," said Malrik.

Fenna lifted the small bell and rang it once softly. Not a loud sound. Just a tiny tone, bright and clear.

Malrik blinked. And Fenna saw it: the sound bothered him. Not because it was loud. Because it didn't fit his rhythm.

“You want the grand sound,” said Fenna, pointing at the tower bell. “You want the night to follow your lead.”

Malrik raised his hand slowly. "Put the bell down."

Fenna didn't put them down.

Instead, she did something that Brann would later describe as "completely crazy" and Tilo as "brave, but please never again".

She held the small bell to the star compass.

Metal touched glass.

The compass vibrated.

And the sound of the little bell did not remain small. It wandered. It went into the streams, as if it were taking root there.

Malrik's face changed. Only briefly. But Fenna saw it: discomfort.

“What are you doing?” asked Malrik, and for the first time he didn’t sound satisfied.

“I bring my own rhythm,” said Fenna.

And while the small note spread through the streams like a bright thread, Fenna down in the factory suddenly heard – somewhere deep in the air – the wrong song falter.

Just a moment.

But it was a moment that said: You can disrupt it. You can change it.

Malrik's eyes turned cold. "You think you can trick me up here."

"I think," said Fenna, her voice now very calm, "that you rely too much on big things. And big things are slow."

Brann grinned, and that was about as rare for Brann as a summer at the North Pole.

Malrik took a step forward.

Fenna didn't take a step back.

And somewhere, far away, in the Polar Courtyard, the Heart Tree beat a weak, brave beat.

Midnight was near.

And now it was no longer just Malrik's stage.

## The snow bridge

The bell tower had the unfriendly habit of making every sound seem self-important. Even a breath took on a solemn quality up there, as if it were about to give a speech. And Fenna knew: when a place pretends to be a stage, sooner or later someone will appear who actually believes it.

Malrik took a step closer. Brann stood beside her, not like an aggressor, but like a door that had decided it would not budge today. Fenna held the star compass in one hand, the small bell in the other, together a tiny, stubborn protest against a large, weighty idea.

"You're playing with things you don't understand," said Malrik.

"Says the elf who feeds soot," Fenna replied. Her voice sounded calmer than she felt. Everything inside her was in flux: fear, anger, hope, and somewhere in between, the extremely practical thought that it's surprisingly difficult to avoid someone in a bell tower if they suddenly decide to become unpleasant.

Malrik raised his hand – not to strike, not in a dramatic gesture, but for something far more annoying: a small, precise movement towards the ropework of the large bell.

Fenna felt it before she saw it. The compass vibrated in her fingers, as if the glass could already hear the rope. The bright currents flickered. The dark ring tightened.

"No," said Fenna.

"Yes," said Malrik, and this "yes" was not an answer, it was a key.

He moved.

The large bell didn't move immediately. Great things are slow to move. But the rope tightened. The metal creaked. And somewhere in the tower, a sound awoke, not yet as a sound, but as anticipation.

Fenna did the only thing left to do when threatened with a huge noise: she made a small, unrelated noise.

She rang the small bell again. A bright, cheeky sound – like a child asking "Why?" in the middle of a serious speech.

The sound traveled into the compass, and this time Fenna felt something change inside the glass. Not just currents, but... rhythm. As if the compass hadn't merely carried the sound, but had remembered it.

Malrik flinched almost imperceptibly. It was almost satisfying.

"You really think," he said slowly, "that you can take a stable bell against a tower."

"Not against the tower," said Fenna. "Against you."

Malrik laughed softly. "You're so... personal."

And then, as if the world were a bad joke with very good timing, something was heard from beneath them that did not belong in the building.

A dull thud.

Not the bell. Not wood. Not metal.

A blow out of the air.

The tower trembled slightly. Fenna felt it in her knees, and Brann felt it in his curse.

"What was that?" he growled.

Fenna looked at the compass. The dark line, which had been a ring a moment ago, was now... a tug. A downward pull, as if someone were tugging at the foundation.

"Something is happening down below," she said.

Malrik smiled. "Midnight is approaching. And midnight is... busy."

Fenna wanted to press the compass glass against his forehead so he could see what it's like when someone explains the world to you. Instead, she forced herself not to react the way he wanted her to.

"You want me to stay up here," she said.

"I want you to vote," said Malrik.

“You’ve said it before,” Fenna said. “And each time it sounds a little more like a threat and a little less like philosophy.”

Malrik's gaze turned cold. "Philosophy is just a threat disguised as more beautiful writing."

Brann took a step forward. "If you talk like that again, I'll give you a nice handwriting in the face."

Malrik finally looked at him, briefly, as if checking whether Brann truly existed or was merely a particularly strong objection. "You," he said, "are so wonderfully simple."

"Thank you," Brann growled.

And then – suddenly, without warning, without dramatic build-up – Malrik pulled on the rope.

The large bell rang.

Not full. Not the monumental, earth-shattering sound one expects from bells. It was more like a half-strike, a clipped note, as if the bell itself had hesitated. But that half-tone was enough.

He went through the tower, through Fenna, through Brann's teeth. He went into the ground, into the beams, into the air. And the tower answered—not with an echo, but with movement.

Part of the cable system snapped. A beam creaked. And then, much worse: Somewhere behind Fenna, by the stairs, a piece of wood slipped out of its anchoring, as if the tower had decided that "safety" is an overrated concept.

Brann turned his head. "Down!"

Fenna didn't like to run. Fenna ran often. That's not the same thing. But she was running now because the ground behind her had just decided to rearrange itself.

They rushed towards the stairs. Malrik stopped. Of course he stopped. He wasn't the one who had to flee. He was the one who had just set a sound into the world, and now he waited to see what the sound would do.

Fenna flung open the door to the stairs, and a blast of cold air hit her. Not the usual winter chill. This was the kind of cold that says: Outside, it's truly outside. The tower had a small exit door on the side, which must have been for maintenance work in the past. Fenna hadn't even noticed it on her way up.

Now it was open.

"That's not good," said Fenna.

“Nothing is good,” said Brann, “but there is air, and air is my favorite thing at the moment.”

They stepped outside.

The wind whipped their faces like a grumpy hand. The dome of the North Pole plant arched above them, but out here on the side of the bell tower, they were still outdoors. Snow swirled.

Ice crunched. And somewhere far below, the factory windows glowed like eyes that weren't blinking.

There was no normal bridge, no proper passage, between the bell tower and the main building. Not anymore. There used to be a footbridge, Fenna suddenly knew, as if the wind were shouting it in her ear. But the footbridge had been dismantled at some point, because nobody likes to admit they need a footbridge when they convince themselves that everything happens inside.

What was there instead was... snow.

Not just snow lying there. But snow that had built. For weeks, months, perhaps years, the wind had blown flakes into a hollow, compressed them, frozen them, covered them again, compressed them again – until something had emerged that looked like a bridge, but was more of a whim of nature.

A snow bridge.

It stretched from the tower door to a bulge in the main building. Below it, instead of a precipice as described in adventure books, there was a deep courtyard filled with scaffolding and utility shafts – which, frankly, was worse, because falling down it didn't feel dramatic at all. It was just a very practical fall.

“Please tell me we don’t have to go over there,” said Fenna.

Brann stepped to the edge and tested the bridge with a kick of his boot. Snow crunched. Ice sang softly. The bridge answered with the kind of sound that doesn't say "yes," but rather "if you insult me, I'll break."

“We have to get over there,” said Brann.

“Why?” asked Fenna, even though she already knew the answer.

Brann gestured back toward the door. Inside, there was another crack, followed by a sound like a piece of wood sliding down the stairs. The tower was in the process of rebuilding itself, and it wasn't doing so creatively, but brutally.

“Because there is no going back,” Brann said.

Fenna glanced at the compass. The currents flickered. And there it was: a bright stream flowing across the snow bridge toward the factory. A strand so clear, as if someone had written "this way" in the light. And at the same time, the dark ring around the tower trembled, as if Malik's sound still echoed, holding the place in place.

"He keeps the tower in time," Fenna whispered.

"Then get out of his rhythm," Brann said.

Fenna stepped onto the snow bridge.

She gave in. Not much. But enough for her body to immediately understand: This isn't ground, this is a promise, and promises can be broken.

They walked slowly, each step cautiously, as if walking on the back of a sleeping animal. The wind tugged at them, and the snow crunched under their boots. Fenna felt the small bell in her pocket gently tap against the compass, as if to say: I'm still here. I'm still me.

Behind them, another metallic creaking sound came from the tower. Not a bell toll. More like an exhalation. As if Malrik were standing up there, listening to them fleeing across his makeshift stage.

"If that thing breaks," Brann whispered, "you jump forward, not down."

"Thank you," whispered Fenna. "Very reassuring."

"I'm not responsible for calming people down," Brann whispered.

A particularly strong gust of wind swept across the bridge. Fenna staggered. Brann grabbed her arm, held her tight, and for a moment it wasn't just protection, but something else entirely: a silent acknowledgment that even the strong sometimes need someone who won't let go.

They reached the middle.

And there Fenna heard something that did not come from the wind.

A soft crackling sound beneath the snow. Not the usual crunching. A finer sound, like hair standing on end.

Fenna stopped.

"What?" whispered Brann.

Fenna carefully lifted the compass. In the glass, the currents flowed across the bridge – and right in the middle, directly beneath her feet, she saw a thin dark line, fresh, vibrant, as if someone had just woven it in.

"He marked the bridge," Fenna whispered.

Brann stared at the snow as if he could see the soot. "How?"

Fenna swallowed. "Because he knew we had to cross here."

The wind howled as if it were laughing.

And somewhere, far away, in the factory, the heart tree waited for its song – while Fenna stood on a bridge of snow that was suddenly no longer just snow, but part of a plan.

If a plan catches you in the middle of a snow bridge, you have two options: You can curse it or you can start thinking.

Fenna did both. Inside she cursed, outside she thought.



"Don't move," she whispered.

Brann still held his arm against hers, tight as a clamp. "I'll only move if you move," he murmured. "That's the kind of teamwork I understand."

The wind continued to tug. The snow beneath them crackled softly. Fenna held the star compass as still as possible. In the glass, the bright streams continued to flow across the bridge—the normal, harmless pathways of the system, which say: People walk here. Heat is carried here. Routine takes place here.

And right in the middle: this dark line.

It wasn't broad like the knot on the heart tree. It was thin, almost elegant. That's precisely what made it dangerous. A thin mistake is the kind of mistake that goes unnoticed for a long time and then suddenly everything falls apart.

"This is no coincidence," Fenna whispered.

"The man is allergic to chance," Brann growled.

Fenna looked more closely at the dark line. It wasn't simply there. It ran through the snow like a seam. A seam.

"He stitched the bridge together," Fenna whispered.

Brann frowned. "With soot?"

"With rhythm," said Fenna. "With the wrong song. The tone from the tower. He made the thing... tense."

As she said this, she suddenly felt it physically: The bridge was vibrating. Very slightly. Not in rhythm with the wind. With a different pulse. And this pulse was too low.

"If we continue," Fenna whispered, "we will be walking to his beat."

"And if we stop," Brann whispered, "we will become a monument."

"And Malrik likes monuments," Fenna murmured. "They're easy to set on fire."

Fenna exhaled. She had to decide. And Malrik lived off others making the decision for him – mostly through panic.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out the small bell. The wind immediately swirled around the metal, as if showing respect for something that could ring.

"What are you doing?" Brann asked.

"I'm giving the bridge a different tone," Fenna whispered.

Brann stared at her. "You want to... change the mind of someone who built a snow bridge."

"I want to undo her stitches," Fenna said.

She held the bell close to the snow, directly above the spot where the dark line on the compass was strongest. She didn't simply ring it. She let it give the faintest nudge – a tiny "thing," barely more than a whisper.

The currents flickered on the compass.

The dark line twitched as if someone had just tapped its fingers.

"Once again," Marei's voice suddenly whispered into Fenna's head – not as a real voice, but as a reminder: If you want to influence something, give it rhythm, not violence.

Fenna rang the bell again. A tiny tone, this time slightly different, deliberately a little higher than the tower tone.

The bridge responded.

Inaudible. But noticeable: The crackling in the snow changed. It became more irregular. Like a fabric that is suddenly no longer taut.

Brann whispered: "I feel something."

"Yes," Fenna whispered. "She's letting go."

At that moment, Fenna heard a sound behind her that briefly froze her blood: another chime from the tower. Not a full strike, but a metallic sigh.

Malrik continued playing.

"He's moving here," Fenna whispered.

"Then we'll move away faster," Brann growled.

Fenna nodded. "Now go. But not quickly. At a steady pace."

They started moving again, step by step. Fenna held the bell ready, ringing it at short intervals – not like an alarm, more like a heartbeat. A sound that says: Here is a different rhythm. This is not yours.

The dark line on the compass remained, but it became thinner, more erratic. It looked less like a seam and more like an attempt.

They took a few more steps.

Then it happened.

A patch of snow beneath Fenna's left foot suddenly gave way, not completely, but enough that she stepped into thin air for a heartbeat. Brann grabbed her instantly, pulled her close, and Fenna felt the wind in the gap beneath them—cold, greedy.

"Don't look," Brann growled.

Of course, Fenna still took a quick look.

Beneath them wasn't simply a courtyard. It was a network of scaffolding, pipes, and service walkways. And somewhere deep below, a black opening, as if someone had left a gateway to the underground open. A chasm leading downwards.

Fenna swallowed. "He's prepared a weak spot."

Brann pulled them on. "Then we won't stand on it."

They continued walking, faster now, but still in a controlled manner. Fenna rang the bell with a defiantly steady rhythm, as if stealing the beat from a bad song.

The bulge in the main building was close. Fenna saw the door they needed to reach. A normal escape route. A normal exit. A normal floor. Normal had suddenly become a luxury.

Ten more steps.

Five more.

Then Fenna heard a noise behind them that did not come from the bell, nor from the wind.

A laugh.

Quiet.

Malrik didn't laugh because it was funny.

He laughed because he had seen something he liked.

"He's still up there," Brann whispered.

"He can hear us," Fenna whispered.

"Should we wave to him?" Brann growled.

"No," whispered Fenna. "We're not giving him an answer."

They reached the door. Brann flung it open. Warmth rushed towards them, the workshop air smelling of wood and work. Fenna jumped inside, Brann followed, and the moment Brann slammed the door shut, they heard a dull crash outside.

Not directly in front of the door, but close enough that the floor beneath them vibrated.

The snow bridge hadn't completely collapsed. But part of it was gone. A piece of snow had sunk, a segment had broken off, as if someone had taken a bite out of it.

Fenna briefly leaned her forehead against the wooden door and breathed.

Brann stood next to her and laughed briefly – not a joyful laugh, more of a "we're still alive" sound.

"He wanted us to fall," said Fenna.

"He wanted you to fall," Brann said. "I'm just an accessory."

Fenna raised the compass. The currents in the glass were still turbulent. The dark ring around the tower was now farther away – but not gone. It stretched across the air like a shadow.

"He didn't get us," said Fenna.

Brann growled in agreement. "Not yet."

Fenna put the small bell back in her pocket. She could feel her heart still beating fast, but there was something else too: a spark of defiance.

"We need to go back to the heart tree," she said.

"Yes," said Brann. "And then we need to figure out what 'Midnight is a switch' means before he flips it."

Fenna nodded. "And we must warn Marei. He's making the air sooty."

"That doesn't sound good," said Brann.

"That's not it either," said Fenna.

They started running again, back into the corridors, back into the factory, back into the wrong song, which by now felt as if it were coming from the walls themselves.

And while they ran, Fenna felt the small bell in her pocket, very still.

As if she were exhausted.

Or as if she were waiting for the next note.

When Fenna and Brann returned to the main passage, the artwork had been noticeably altered.

Not visible like a broken table or an overturned sled. More like a room where someone has just replaced the air – only it didn't get fresher, but thinner. Voices sounded higher. Footsteps sounded harsher. And over everything lay this feeling that you were making a mistake, without knowing what it was.

"He did it," Fenna murmured.

"What?" Brann growled.

Fenna raised the star compass. The currents within it were restless. The bright network flickered as if it no longer trusted itself. And interspersed among them: dark threads. Not just on the tower, not just on the tree. Everywhere. Like fine cracks in glass.

“He spreads the soot,” said Fenna. “Not as a stain. As... fog.”

Brann spat out a curse word that sounded so old it had probably been stored in the storeroom. “How do you disperse soot in the air?”

“With song,” said Fenna. “With rhythm. With—”

She fell silent because she suddenly heard something.

Not the wrong song. Not the hum of the workshop.

A new sound.

A faint, frantic ringing from the direction of the main workshop. Not loud. Many small ringing sounds, jumbled together, as if someone had thrown ten reindeer bells into a sack and then shaken it.

“Alarm bells,” Brann murmured.

Fenna felt a pang. The next chapter was on her mind, the next problem that Malrik was probably moving around the board like a game piece.

They ran faster.

The closer they came, the more elves streamed towards them – some in panic, some furious, some with faces already searching for scapegoats, even though no one had yet said “blame.” That was precisely the most dangerous part: the soot hadn’t just changed the air. It had heightened the tension.

“What’s going on?” Fenna shouted to an elf hurrying past.

The elf looked at her, and in his eyes was sheer terror. “The bells! They... they ring by themselves! And the shift indicators are crazy! And someone says the sled core—”

“Where is Klirr?” Brann interjected.

“Polarhof!” gasped the elf and ran on.

Fenna and Brann turned off, heading out towards the Polarhof.

There was chaos – but not wild chaos. Organized chaos. Klirr stood in the middle of it like a nail in a storm. Guards paced. Elves carried crates. A few workshop foremen shouted about something that usually only happens during major repairs. And the Heart Tree... the Heart Tree was almost silent.

Not dead. But frighteningly close.

The trunk was only glowing faintly. The humming was barely audible. If the tree was a heart, then it was a heart that had decided to conserve energy.

Marei knelt on the ground, her hands on the trunk, and Tilo stood beside her, so pale he was barely visible in the snow. Alva stood behind them, her eyes closed, as if she were keeping the rhythm within herself.

“Fenna!” Marei called as Fenna arrived. Her voice was tense, but clear. “He’s pulling it out. He’s pulling the pulse out of the trunk.”

Fenna ripped open the suitcase and pulled out the bag containing the old song. “We’ve got it. We’ve got Frostlight.”

Marei nodded, almost relieved. “Good. Now then.”

Brann stopped, glanced briefly at the tree, then at Fenna. “Do it.”

Fenna knelt down. The snow was cold, but Fenna barely felt it. She only felt the tree, that weak, brave humming, clinging to the world like a memory.

Alva opened her eyes. “Not quickly,” she said. “Right.”

Fenna nodded. She pulled out the Frostlight bottle, dipped her fingertips in, and this time it was different than at the knots. Here, at the trunk, the Frostlight wasn’t like a knife. It was like clear air.

She gently stroked the bark where Marei had her hand. The compass vibrated, and the bright streams briefly sharpened, as if someone had blown away the fog.

“Now the bag,” Marei whispered.

Fenna held the sack in both hands. It was warm. Not physically warm—warm like a piece of music that hasn’t yet been played. She untied the drawstring, and at the very moment the sack opened, something happened that Fenna hadn’t expected:

She was listening to a song.

Not in the ears.

In the chest cavity.

A rhythm that wasn’t cheerful, but true. A beat that didn’t glitter, but carried. A song that said: You don’t have to smile to be good. You just have to be there.

Fenna felt her throat tighten. She was tired. So tired. And this rhythm felt like permission.

“Put it on,” said Alva.

Fenna placed the open sack against the trunk, right where the bark glowed least. Not like a gift. Like a bandage. Like something that needed to cling to it.

The trunk reacted immediately. A tiny glimmer. A faint hum, louder.

“More,” Marei whispered.

Fenna swept the area once more with frost light, then pressed the sack more firmly against the trunk.

The compass showed it: The bright streams flowed more clearly. The dark knot pulled – but it encountered resistance.

Tilo whispered, half-startled: "It... it works."

And then, as if Malrik had sensed the moment somewhere up in the tower – because of course he did – the air in the Polar Courtyard vibrated.

A barely audible hum, a false note that pierced the edge of the song like a knife.

The tree hummed – and the humming stopped.

"He's here," said Marei, her eyes wide.

Fenna looked up.

Malrik stood at the edge of the Polar Courtyard, in the shadow of a dome support.

Not running, not panting, not dramatic.

Simply there.

It was as if the room had spat him out.

His gaze fell upon the sack on the tree trunk, upon the frost light, upon the compass.

And Fenna saw something in his face that she had rarely seen in him before:

Real anger.

"You used him," Malrik said quietly.

"Yes," said Fenna. She stood up slowly, the compass in her hand. "And we won't give it up."

Malrik's eyes were cold. "Then you're taking away my choice."

"No," said Fenna. "We're taking the stage from you."

Malrik smiled, but it wasn't a genuine smile. It was a crack. "Midnight," he said, "is still standing."

And then he raised his hand, snapped his fingers – so lightly, so small – and suddenly bells could be heard everywhere in the factory.

Not one.

Many.

Ringling, screeching, chaotic.

Like a herd of metal running through the air.

Tilo pressed his hands to his ears. Alva closed her eyes. Marei cursed softly.

Fenna sensed it in the compass: the currents were becoming chaotic. The soot haze in the air was thickening. Malrik had almost flipped the switch.

"You can't hold the tree everywhere at once," Malrik said quietly.

Fenna held his gaze. "Maybe not."

Malrik inclined his head. "Then you'll lose something."

And at that moment, the dome creaked somewhere above them.

Not loud. But enough for everyone in the Polarhof to hear it.

A sound like a crack running across ice.

Klirr cursed audibly for the first time.

"The crack in the dome," Alva murmured.

Fenna felt her heart sink.

Midnight was not just a meeting.

At midnight there was a crackling sound in the sky.

## The Night of the Silent Alarm Bells

First, it was the bells that said too much.

They rang throughout the factory like a swarm of panicked metal insects, everywhere at once, in mismatched pitches, in mutually insulting rhythms. It wasn't an alarm indicating danger. It was an alarm that invented danger so it would have something to do.

And then, quite suddenly, some of them fell silent.

That was the moment Fenna understood why this night wouldn't later be called the Night of Loud Alarm Bells. Loud was simple. Loud was honest. Loud could be ignored if there were enough other noises.

Still was insidious.



Silent meant that something should have rung somewhere, but it didn't. Silent meant that someone had turned off the alarm – not the sound, but the warning itself.

Fenna stood in the Polar Courtyard, gripping the star compass so tightly her fingers ached. The heart tree hummed weakly beneath the sack of the old song, like a heart afraid to beat properly again for fear of not being worth it.

Above them, the dome creaked once more. A sound like a crack deciding to become serious.

Klirr slashed the air with his hand. A wordless command. Guards sprang into action. Elves jerked their heads up, as if they had just realized that a roof is more than just decoration.

Malrik stood at the edge of the courtyard, in the shadows, as if personally inspecting the crack in the sky. His face was calm, but his gaze was sharp. He didn't revel in the tension like a child who cheers at a bang. He reveled in it like someone who knows that bangs are just the sound of control.

"You can't hold the tree everywhere at once," he had said.

Fenna hated that it sounded true.

"What's wrong with the dome?" shouted Brann, who immediately switched into "Big thing broken, I want to scream at it" mode.

Marei was still standing by the trunk, both hands on the bark, as if supporting the tree. "The rhythm travels through the pipes," she said, her voice firm, but her eyes too alert. "If the currents are chaotic, the dome is subjected to uneven stress. It's not just glass. It's... an instrument."

"And someone just stepped on it," Brann growled.

Tilo pressed his hands to his ears and then pulled them away again, because the ringing wasn't just in his ears. "It's like... like when you have a candy cane in your pocket and it melts. You think it's quiet, and then suddenly everything's sticky."

"Nice metaphor," Alva said dryly. "I hate them."

Klirr stepped forward, so close to Fenna that Fenna could see her breath. "The bells," said Klirr. "Some have fallen silent."

Fenna looked at the compass. The bright currents flickered. And indeed: where small, clear lines usually light up when a warning is triggered somewhere, there were gaps. Black, clean gaps.

"He doesn't just turn on noise," Fenna said. "He turns off warning."

Malrik smiled at the edge of the courtyard, as if he had heard her. Perhaps he had. Perhaps he heard everything that frightens.

"What does he want?" Brann asked.

"He wants us to no longer know where the fire is," said Fenna.

Alva looked up, to where the crack in the dome stretched across the glass like a thin line. "He wants us to set ourselves on fire," she said softly.

Klirr raised his hand, and once again the elves ran off. "Barricade the dome support northeast. No groups under glass. Get supports. Get ropes. Get everything you need when you realize that a sky suddenly needs to be repaired."

"And Malrik?" asked Fenna.

Klirr looked at the shadow. "He won't just stand still."

As if Malrik had been waiting for this cue, he raised his hand, slowly, almost politely. Then he made a small gesture – not a snap of his fingers this time, but an invitation. A “please look here”.

And where there had just been only shadows, a dark current briefly flickered in the compass, jumping like a spark to the left – towards the factory buildings.

“He’s steering,” said Marei.

“He divides us,” said Fenna.

“Then we won’t split up,” Brann growled. “We’ll all go—”

“No,” Klirr said immediately. “We’re not all leaving. That’s his wish. That’s his game. He wants quantity. Quantity leads to mistakes.”

Fenna took a deep breath. The Polar Courtyard was bustling with activity, but it wasn't the kind of activity that moved towards a goal, but rather stumbled from goal to goal. And somewhere in that stumbling motion, Malrik would place his knife.

“I’m going to the dome support side,” Klirr said. “I’m holding the court. Marei stays by the tree. Alva stays with Marei.”

Tilo made a noise as if he had just learned he was part of a plan. "I'm staying... really?"

Alva looked at him. "You're staying because you can't hide your fear in movement. Not today."

Tilo swallowed. "I knew I would regret this someday."

"You'll regret it later," Alva said. "Now you're breathing."

Klirr turned to Fenna. "You go where the silent bells are."

Fenna felt her stomach briefly tilt. "How should I—"

“With this,” said Klirr, pointing to the compass. “And with your head. It’s annoying, but useful.”

Brann stepped next to Fenna. "I'm going with you."

Klirr nodded once. "You're keeping her alive."

"That was always my plan," Brann growled.

Fenna glanced once more at the heart tree. The sack containing the old song lay against the trunk, and the glow within it was a little stronger than before. Not healthy, but not dead. A heart that refuses to give up.

Then she looked up.

The crack in the dome was thin, but it was there. And it continued to spread, almost invisibly, like a thought that cannot be stopped once it has begun.

"Let's go," said Fenna.

She and Brann ran back into the workshops, into the chaos of sounds and the even more dangerous silence between them. And as they ran, Fenna noticed that some elves had stopped in the middle of the corridor, looking at each other as if they had forgotten why they were running.

"What are you doing?" Brann called out to them.

"We... we didn't hear anything," one stammered.

"Exactly," Fenna murmured. "Silent bells."

She raised the compass. Where the currents usually flashed during a warning, there was a gap—and this gap was moving. Not like a shadow on the wall. Like something swimming through the air.

"There," said Fenna, turning off the main paths into a side passage that led to a rarely used area: the old lamp storage.

It was darker there, not because the lamps were off, but because the lamps were stored there, waiting to be used again someday. Stacks of lanterns, light globes, replacement lenses. And in the middle of that room lay a feeling of... absence. As if a part of the air had been erased.

Brann stepped inside and grimaced. "I feel sick."

"That's not you," said Fenna. "That's the soot. It makes opinion out of air."

She continued walking, following the compass, and then she heard it: a soft clacking sound, like glass hitting glass.

A figure stood between two shelves.

Not Malrik. Too big. Too wide. Too... quiet.

A man in a coat who looked as if he'd seen a thousand winters and personally insulted each one. A beard like snow, but not decorative. A face that wasn't cheerful, but could be friendly when it wanted to be. And eyes that didn't regard the work as a stage, but as a promise.

Santa Claus.

He stood there as if he hadn't been summoned, but had simply appeared because the work needed him. In his hand he held a lamp that didn't flicker. It burned steadily, as if it had never heard of any discordant songs.

Fenna stopped, suddenly unable to decide whether to feel relieved or even more nervous. Brann made a noise somewhere between respect and "oh no, now it's official."

Santa Claus looked at Fenna. His gaze immediately fell on the compass. Then on her hands. Then on her face.

"You set the beat," he said calmly.

Fenna blinked. "Uh... yeah?"

He nodded slowly, as if Fenna had just confirmed something very important, very obvious. "And someone is taking him away."

"Yes," said Fenna, and suddenly it sounded too small for what was happening.

Santa Claus took a step closer. The lamp in his hand remained still. And in the silence around him, Fenna realized, the silent alarm bells didn't grow louder—but clearer. As if his presence were making the gaps visible.

"Where is he?" asked Santa Claus.

Brann growled: "The splintered beard."

Santa's eyes hardened for a moment. Not angrily. Heavy. Like snow that knows it can crush a roof.

"Then," he said, his voice quiet but filling the room, "we'll find him. Before midnight decides who can still hear."

Santa Claus wasn't moving hastily. That was the first thing Fenna noticed as she walked beside him through the lamp warehouse.

Haste was everywhere. Haste was in the corridors, in the voices, in the hands trying to grasp too many things at once. Haste was even in the lanterns lying on the shelves, as if they were about to jump up and shout: I can help too!

Santa Claus wasn't in a hurry. He had direction.

He walked between the shelves, the lamp in his hand, and the light from that lamp was... strange. Not bright in the sense of "look how beautifully I shine," but bright in the sense of "I'm here whether you like it or not." It was a light that didn't beg for attention.

Brann walked a step behind Fenna, and Fenna noticed that he unconsciously stood up straighter, as if his spine were suddenly wearing a uniform.

"So..." Fenna began, then realized how stupid that word was at that moment. So what? So welcome? So sorry everything's on fire?

Santa Claus didn't even look surprised that she wanted to talk. He looked like someone who had long since learned that in times of crisis, people either cry or talk, and both are just air trying to find its way out.

"The silent bells," he said calmly. "They are no coincidence. It's a pattern."

Fenna raised the star compass. The currents shimmered in the glass, and the gaps in them—the places where alarms should have sounded—were not, in fact, scattered chaotically. They formed a kind of line that ran through the work like a series of extinguished stars.

"One way," Fenna murmured.

"A path," confirmed Santa Claus. "And paths are made so that someone will follow them."

Brann growled. "He's luring us."

Santa Claus nodded. "Yes."

"And we're going anyway," said Fenna.

"Yes," said Santa Claus, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "But we're not leaving the way he expects."

Fenna would have liked to ask how exactly one surprises a saboteur who has made even the air itself manipulable. Instead, she followed, because questions at that moment were like tripwires.

The path of silence led out of the lamp warehouse, through a side corridor, past a door labeled "REPLACEMENT GLASS ONLY" – which suddenly seemed like a threat to Fenna – and then on towards the light factory.

The lantern workshop was the department where lanterns were built, tested, cleaned, and imbued with the quiet belief that light is a kind of promise. It usually smelled of oil, metal, polish, and that little bit of pride one feels when making a lamp shine without singeing their eyebrows.

Today it smelled of cold smoke.

Not like a brand, but like something that remembers what a brand smells like.

Fenna felt it on her tongue before she could name it. A dry, bitter taste that had nothing to do with food and everything to do with mood.

"Here," Fenna said softly.

Brann nodded. "Things are about to get disgusting."

Santa Claus stood before the door, not touching the handle. He listened. And Fenna swore she silently heard something like a very distant bell that should no longer ring.

"If you go in," Brann said roughly, "and there he is, then—"

"Then," said Santa Claus, and the word was not an interruption but an anchor, "he will try to make you angry. He will show you what you have to lose. He will remind you of what annoys you. He will tell you that you are right."

Fenna felt her back grow cold. "Why is 'being right' a danger here?"

Santa Claus looked at her, and in his eyes was that exhausted patience that adults sometimes have when they explain for the tenth time why you shouldn't stick a fork into a power socket.

"Because 'being right'," he said, "is often what people cling to when they no longer know what is right."

Brann grunted as if he understood and hated it.

Fenna raised the compass. The dark threads were denser here. Not like a knot, more like fog that had decided to make itself at home inside. And the silent gaps in the alarm network lay directly above this door, as if someone had put up a sign: Don't look here.

Santa Claus opened the door.

Inside, the light display wasn't dark. It was illuminated. But it was the wrong kind of illumination. Lamps were on, yes – but they burned in such a way that their beams of light didn't warm, but rather cut through the space. Shadows were too harsh in the corners. The glare was mocking.

Rows of lanterns lay on long tables. Hundreds of them. Some finished, some half-finished. And above it all hung a hum, very quiet, as if the metal itself were whispering.

Fenna felt Brann holding his breath beside her, as if he were afraid the humming might hear him.

"That's... out of tune," whispered Fenna.

"Yes," said Santa Claus. "Here, light becomes a tool."

They went further inside. Fenna saw a row of small alarm bells hanging in a corner – the normal workshop bells that ring when there are problems, if someone gets too close to the wrong wire or if a lamp overheats.

These bells hung silent.

And the eerie thing wasn't that they didn't ring the doorbell. It was that they acted as if they should never have rung it. As if someone had erased their memory.

Santa Claus lifted the lamp, and its light fell upon the alarm bells. For a moment, something flickered within them—not the sound, but the longing for it. A tremor in the metal.

"They are still there," said Fenna.

"Yes," said Santa Claus. "They're just... covered up."

"With soot," Brann murmured.

"With resentment," Fenna said quietly, because now she knew how it felt: like a thin film over everything that makes you believe the world owes you something.

They followed the humming sound. It led to a workbench at the end of the hall, where the large main lanterns hanging in the dome were usually inspected. Now, on this table lay a single lantern, larger than the others, with a glass that was not clear but smoky.

Next to it lay a note.

Of course, there was a note there.

Malrik wasn't the type to just do things. He liked to comment on them because he wanted you to hear your own reaction.

Fenna approached cautiously. The compass vibrated as if saying: Yes. Yes. Yes. Danger.

She read the note.

"You want to hear when something is wrong. So I have taken the hearing away from you. Midnight will show you how quiet it can be when no one warns you anymore."

Fenna swallowed. Brann growled, deep and dangerous.

Santa Claus didn't look at the note. He looked at the lantern.

"That's his job," he said quietly.

Fenna felt her heart pounding. "What kind of lantern is that?"

"A dome lantern," said Santa Claus. "It usually hangs at the top, from the girders. It's part of the rhythm. If it shines incorrectly, the girders get tired. If girders get tired, glass cracks."

Fenna thought of the crack in the sky. The cracking sound. The thin line that spread.

"He didn't just spread the soot," Fenna said. "He... built it into the light."

"Yes," said Santa Claus.

Brann stepped closer, his fists clenched. "Then we'll rip this thing out."

"If you tear it out," Fenna said quickly, "you might tear out the last piece that holds the dome together."

Brann stopped. He gritted his teeth. "I hate that you're right."

Fenna looked at the compass. The dark threads stretched out from the lantern like a net. And somewhere within them was a point that was moving. Not quickly. Certainly.

"He is not here," Fenna whispered. "But his net is here. And he is running in it."

Santa Claus lifted the lamp a little further, and the gentle light fell upon the smoky dome lantern. For a moment, Fenna saw the film of soot on the glass flicker. Like a shadow momentarily uncertain.

"Can you..." Fenna began, realizing how ridiculous the question was. Can you what? Save Christmas?

Santa Claus looked at her. And in his gaze there was no magic that solves everything. But something much more uncomfortable.

"I can carry," he said calmly. "I can hold. I can shine. But I cannot decide how you react when someone offers you their anger."

Fenna felt her throat tighten. "He offers them everywhere."

"Yes," said Santa Claus. "And at midnight he will make them fall like snow."

Brann growled. "Then we'll stop him before he does."

Fenna raised the compass. The moving dot in the net was clearer. It was pointing towards a side passage that led to the dome's maintenance walkway.

"That way," said Fenna.

Santa Claus nodded. "Then we'll go."

They set off – Fenna in front, Brann beside her, Santa Claus behind them, steady as a lantern that doesn't flicker. And as they ran, Fenna heard bells ringing again in the factory.

Not all of them. Not chaotic.

A couple.

Then silence again.

Like breaths.

Like a countdown.

Midnight didn't come with a bang.

Midnight came with gaps.

The maintenance walkway to the dome was not designed to be used in a panic.



It was built to be used slowly. With gloves. With a notepad. With the gentle respect of someone who knows that glass, while beautiful, is also very good at cutting you if you insult it.

Today they insulted it.

Fenna ran ahead, compass in hand, the boardwalk vibrating beneath her boots as if in protest. Brann followed, heavy, sure, so close that Fenna could feel his warmth. Behind them walked Santa Claus, not fast, but steady. His lamplight remained steady, cutting a clear corridor through the darkness where the shadows didn't look so malevolent.

Above them arched the dome. The crack was now visible, like a thin, pale flash of lightning caught in the glass. It wasn't huge. But it was... there. And that was enough to make everyone in the factory feel as if the heavens were suddenly remembering a bad idea.

"The dot is moving faster," Fenna gasped.

She looked at the compass. The dark dot in the network was indeed moving, as if someone were running or gliding beneath it. And the silent alarm gaps followed it like a trail of non-noise.

"He makes himself invisible by turning off the warning system," Brann growled.

"Yes," said Fenna. "He's cutting himself out of the spotlight."

Santa Claus said calmly: "He is not invisible. He is just... unheard."

Fenna sensed how true that was. The work was full of light, full of voices – and yet someone could disappear into it if they did the right things quietly.

The walkway led to a platform directly beneath a dome support. The large dome lanterns hung there, and cables and pulleys ran between them, which one usually only notices when they are broken.

Fenna stopped abruptly.

Beneath the platform, in the shadow of the support, stood a figure.

Not Malrik.

An eleven.

A worker, his cap pulled low over his face, his hands on a bundle of cables. An ordinary elf, pretending to be making repairs.

"Hey," said Fenna.

The elf slowly raised his head.

And Fenna recognized him immediately.

Jaro.

Or rather: what was left of Jaro when someone is made a scapegoat for so long that he himself believes he is one.

His gaze was flickering. Too alert. Too empty. A fine, dark film of dust clung to his cheeks, as if someone had dusted him with soot and then said: Smile.

"You shouldn't be here," Jaro said.

His voice didn't sound angry. It sounded... like a phrase he'd been taught.

Brann took a step forward. "Jaro. Let go of the cable."

Jaro gripped the bundle tighter. "It has to be this way. It has to be... right."

Fenna raised the compass. The dark spot in the net wasn't Malrik. It was Jaro.

"You are the path," Fenna whispered.

Jaro stared at her. "I... I'm helping. I'm finally helping."

"You are helping him," said Fenna.

Jaro shook his head violently. "No! You don't understand. He said... he said that when the bells are silent, someone will finally hear my voice."

Brann growled. "He used you."

"He saw me!" Jaro suddenly exclaimed, and now the emotion was raw. "He saw how you looked at me. How you laughed. How you whispered. I was always the one to blame. Always! And he said I could change that."

Fenna felt her chest tighten. The soot wasn't just dust. It was an offer. An offer of significance to the wrong people.

Santa Claus took a step closer, calmly, raising the lamp. The light fell on Jaro's face, and Fenna saw the film of soot on his skin flicker briefly.

"Jaro," said Santa Claus.

Jaro froze, as if he were facing a legend, and legends are about as unpleasant for elves as an unannounced inspection.

"I... I didn't want to..." Jaro stammered.

"You want to be heard," Santa Claus said softly. "That's not a crime."

Jaro swallowed, and suddenly there was something in his eyes that frightened Fenna almost more than the soot: hope.

"Then... then you will hear me," Jaro whispered.

Santa Claus nodded. "I hear you."

Fenna felt the sentence spread through the room like a warm wave. Brann relaxed slightly. Jaro trembled.

"But," Santa Claus continued, his tone remaining calm, "I also hear that you are about to damage the dome."

Jaro shook his head again. "No. I... I repair it."

Fenna took a step closer. "What are you doing with the cable?"

Jaro looked at the bundle as if he'd forgotten it existed. "He said I have to... rearrange the lanterns. Change the tempo. Then... then you won't hear the wrong song anymore because there'll be a new one."

"A new one that belongs to him," Fenna said.

Jaro pressed his lips together. "He said you don't want me. But he does want me. And I can... be important."

Brann growled, but Fenna raised a hand. Brann was a hammer. Hammers are helpful, but they're bad at conversation.

Fenna exhaled and said, "Jaro, do you remember the key?"

Jaro blinked.

"The wide key," said Fenna. "The one you had. The one you gave me. You didn't give it to Malrik. You gave it to me."

Jaro looked at her as if he were fighting his way through fog. "I... I just wanted to..."

"You wanted it to be right," Fenna said. "That was real. That was yours. Malrik just took it and twisted it."

Jaro trembled. The film of soot on his face made it seem as if he were fighting back, as if it were something of his own.

"He says you're all wrong," Jaro whispered. "He says the factory is lying. He says Santa Claus—"

Jaro broke off, as if he didn't dare to finish the sentence.

Santa Claus stepped even closer, his light steady, his voice soft. "What does he say about me?"

Jaro swallowed. "He says you only listen to songs. Not to elves. He says you—"

“—only see the result,” Fenna finished quietly, because she knew it. That was Malrik’s favorite poison: the feeling of being overlooked.

Santa Claus nodded slowly. "Then he showed you a wound that exists," he said. "And he told you that you can heal it with a knife."

Jaro began to cry. Quietly. Not dramatically. Just tears falling from his eyes, as if he could no longer hold them back.

"I didn't want it to break," he whispered.

Fenna looked at the crack at the top of the glass. "It's already breaking."

Jaro clutched the cable. “He’s coming,” he whispered suddenly, panicking. “He’s coming if I don’t—”

And at that exact moment, Fenna heard it.

Not steps.

A soft whistling sound.

Too deep.

Malrik was near.

Brann tensed. Fenna felt her pulse quicken. Santa Claus raised the lamp, and the light didn't get brighter, but... stronger.

“Jaro,” Fenna said quickly. “Let go of the cable. Come to us. Now.”

Jaro looked back and forth, between the cable and the faces. Between the soot in his head and the light in front of him.

The whistling grew closer.

Jaro exhaled a sobbing breath and let go of the cable.

It didn't fall. It got stuck. But it was free.

At that moment, the compass vibrated, and the silent alarm gaps flickered. As if someone had heard again for a heartbeat.

"Good," said Fenna.

And then Malrik stepped out of the carrier's shadow, directly behind Jaro, as if he had been there for a long time and had only been waiting for someone to make the wrong decision.

His gaze fell upon Jaro, upon Fenna, upon Brann – and then upon Santa Claus.

Malrik stopped.

For the first time, he didn't seem superior. He seemed surprised.

"Ah," Malrik said quietly. "Now it's getting... personal."

Santa Claus looked at him. Calmly. Heavily.

"Malrik," he said.

Malrik smiled thinly. "Boss."

And in that one word lay everything: mockery, defiance, decades of resentment – and the clear will to break the rhythm tonight.

The crack in the dome creaked.

The silent alarm bells were ringing.

And midnight was written directly behind Malrik's smile.

## The sled core gets cold

Midnight was not a moment.

Midnight was a state of being.

Fenna sensed it as she stood on the platform beneath the dome's support beam, facing Malrik. The air was thin, not only because of the altitude, but because the soot mist had transformed the atmosphere of the work into something else entirely: less oxygen, more opinion.

Santa Claus stood still, lamp in hand, like a light that has learned not to flicker. Brann stood to the side, ready to be a wall. Jaro stood between them, trembling, as if he had just realized that "being important" doesn't automatically mean "being right."

Malrik smiled, and his smile was the worst part because it wasn't hysterical. It was precise.

"Boss," he had said.

Santa Claus didn't answer immediately. He looked at Malrik as if he were remembering when that elf had become a splintered beard. And there was no nostalgia in that look. Only weight.

"You didn't have to be here," Santa Claus finally said.

Malrik shrugged. "And you wouldn't have had to wait so long."

Fenna felt the compass vibrate in her hand. Not wildly, not panicky. More like an instrument that notices: Someone is fiddling with me now.

Santa Claus lifted the lamp slightly. "You're tired, Malrik."

Malrik laughed softly. "Oh, I'm wide awake. I finally have an audience that isn't just smiling."

"The artwork is not an audience," said Santa Claus. "It is a home."

"A home," Malrik repeated, his tone making the word almost sticky. "A home where you're never allowed to say you hate it. A home where you have to smile so the home doesn't get sad. A home that devours you and then asks you to thank it."

Fenna listened to her own breathing. She didn't want to agree. But she understood why it worked. Malrik said things that sounded like truth because they touched on parts of the truth.

Santa Claus nodded slowly. "There are areas where we need to improve. That's true."

Malrik blinked, briefly irritated. Apparently, he had expected a rejection, not agreement.

"But," said Santa Claus quietly, "you have decided to fill these places with soot instead of work."

Malrik's smile sharpened. "Work. Always work. Always a little more, a little more cheerful, a little faster, so that the world out there gets its warm feelings."

Brann growled. "The world out there is full of children."

Malrik looked at him. "So? Children are the most dangerous customers. They can tell when you're lying."

Fenna felt something stirring inside her. She wanted to answer, but Santa Claus raised a hand, calmly.

"You did something tonight," he said. "You didn't just disturb. You... disconnected."

Malrik inclined his head. "I've done things quietly that never needed to be loud."

Fenna looked at the compass. The dark ring that had stretched from the bell tower now lay here too, like a thin veil. And somewhere beneath it... something was stirring. Not at the heart tree. Something else.

A train that descended into the depths, towards the workshop core.

Fenna felt it in her stomach. "The sled core," she whispered.

Marei wasn't here, but Fenna heard Marei's voice in her head: When the beat changes, the warmth changes.

"What is it?" Brann asked immediately.

Fenna raised the compass. "It's not just pulling on the tree. It's pulling... on the sled core."

Santa Claus's face remained calm, but his eyes narrowed. "You touched him."

Malrik smiled. "Touched? I was just listening to him. And then I showed him that coldness can also be a song."

In the distance, far below, a noise could be heard.

A dull, long humming sound – not from the heart tree. From something that's rotating. Or trying to rotate.

Then: silence.

Fenna felt the compass become heavier for a moment, as if someone had placed a hand on the glass.

"It's getting cold," Fenna said. "The sled core is getting cold."

Jaro sobbed softly. "I... I didn't know..."

"Of course you didn't know that," Fenna said quickly, without taking her eyes off Malrik. "He never tells you the whole story. He only gives you enough to make you do what he wants."

Malrik smiled at Jaro. Kindly. And that kindness was cruel. "Jaro did what he could. He wanted to be heard. Is that so bad?"

Santa Claus looked at Jaro, and his gaze was soft. "No."

Then he looked at Malrik again. And his gaze hardened. Not angrily. Hard as frozen wood.

"But you used him," he said.

Malrik shrugged. "Everyone uses everyone here. You just call it something different."

"Enough," Brann growled.

Malrik smiled at Brann. "You want to strike. I understand. But if you strike, the work will hear you. And it will... react."

Fenna sensed how true that was. The soot in the air waited for anger. Waited for someone to provide the wrong energy, so that the fog would thicken.

Santa Claus took a step forward. "You wanted midnight."

"Yes," said Malrik.

"Then listen carefully," said Santa Claus, quietly.

He raised the lamp, and the light fell directly on Malrik's face. For a moment, Malrik's splintered beard seemed less like decoration and more like what it was: small fragments clinging to something. Protection. Defiance. Wound.

Santa Claus said: "When the core of the sleigh gets cold, Christmas is over."

Malrik smiled as if it were a compliment. "Finally."

"And when Christmas comes," Santa Claus continued, "so do the things you think you can control."

Malrik blinked. "What do you mean?"

Santa's voice remained calm. "The kernel doesn't just keep the sleigh warm. It keeps the path open. It keeps the sky... soft."

Fenna felt her stomach clench. The crack in the dome. The lanterns. The network of streams.

"If the core gets cold," Fenna whispered, "the dome will become brittle."

"Exactly," said Santa Claus.

Malrik's smile faltered for the first time. Just a little. But Fenna saw it. He had viewed the sled core as a symbol. As a lever. Perhaps he hadn't considered that levers sometimes pull the entire mechanism along with them.

"You're playing with the foundation," said Santa Claus.

Malrik lifted his chin. "I'm playing with what has played me my whole life."

Brann growled. "Then it's your turn to lose."

Malrik shook his head slowly. "You don't understand. When the core cools down, the work finally stops drowning itself out. Then there is silence. And in silence, one can... begin anew."

Fenna felt the soot-covered fog around her grow thicker, as if Malrik's words had fed it. Not anger, but something else: this cold longing for "everything new," which often only means "everything broken."

Santa Claus said quietly: "Starting anew is not destroying. Starting anew is repairing while it is still alive."

Malrik looked at him, and now there was real anger in his eyes. "You never repaired anything! You just painted over it! You just hung up lights!"

"That's not true," said Santa Claus.

And then something happened that Fenna hadn't expected:

The lamp in his hand flickered.

Only briefly.

But it flickered.

Fenna looked at the compass. A dark thread shot from Malrik's direction into the lamplight, like a thin attack.



"He is attacking the light," Fenna shouted.

Brann jumped forward, instinctively, as if he could protect Light.

Santa Claus raised the lamp higher, and his gaze remained calm, but now there was something like... coldness in his voice. Not angry. Of course.

"You want everything to be quiet," he said to Malrik. "Then listen."

He lowered the lamp.

And at that moment they heard it.

Not bells.

Incorrect.

A deep, creaking sound ran through the work, as if a huge metal heart were slowly ceasing to beat.

The sled core.

He wasn't completely out. But he was getting cold.

And down below, somewhere in the factory halls, some of the lights went out.

When the lights suddenly go out in a work built of light, it feels as if someone is pulling the floor out from under you, only to realize: Oh, the floor was just there out of habit all along.

Fenna sensed it when the dome lamps flickered in the distance. Not all of them. Not immediately. But enough to notice. The crack in the dome creaked again, as if the glass could hear the change and didn't like it.

"Get down," Brann growled.

"Yes," said Fenna, and she didn't know whether she was addressing the word to Brann or to her own heart.

They couldn't "position" Malrik up here. Not because they didn't want to, but because any wrong move would feed the soot fog. And because Malrik had an unbeatable advantage up here: height. Stage. Echo.

Santa Claus turned his head, glanced briefly at the crack, then back at Malrik. "You want silence," he said calmly. "Then you'll get it. But not in the way you think."

Malrik grinned thinly. "That sounds like a threat."

"It's a warning," said Santa Claus.

Fenna would have liked to freeze the entire conversation like a clock, but the compass suddenly vibrated so strongly that she almost thought the glass would crack.

"He's not just here," Fenna gasped.

"Of course he's not just here," Brann growled. "He's a problem."

"No," said Fenna, staring into the glass. "I mean... he's moving something. At the same time. Down below."

The dark veil in the compass moved, and this time it was clear: A large current – similar to the one at the heart tree, but colder – flowed towards the workshop center. To where the sled core lay.

Santa Claus nodded once. "He's pulling at the core."

Malrik smiled. "I'm just listening. The core answers."

"He answers because you make him unresponsive," said Fenna.

Malrik raised his hand as if holding an invisible thread between his fingers. "If you pull on a song long enough," he said softly, "it will eventually believe you that it's wrong."

Fenna felt the sentence like a stab in the heart. It wasn't just sabotage. It was manipulation. Just like with Jaro. Just like with the bells. Just like with everything.

"We need to get down," said Fenna.

Santa Claus nodded. "Go."

Brann blinked. "And you?"

Santa Claus looked at Malrik. "I'll stay until you're downstairs. You don't leave a door open if there's a draft."

Malrik laughed softly. "You want to stop me? Up here? All alone?"

"I want to keep you busy," said Santa Claus.

Malrik tilted his head. "That sounds like a game."

"It's work," said Santa Claus.

Fenna wanted to disagree, wanted to say that Santa Claus shouldn't be used as a distraction, but she realized how silly that was. Santa Claus wasn't porcelain. He was part of the whole. And when the core gets cold, nobody is porcelain. Then everyone is just wood and metal, hoping they don't break.

"Come on," Brann growled.

Fenna grabbed Jaro's arm. "You're coming with me."

Jaro flinched. "I... I mustn't..."

"Above all, you mustn't be alone again," Fenna said.

Jaro swallowed and nodded, like someone who is just realizing that all his bad decisions also have social consequences.

They ran down the stairs. The walkway vibrated, and the air was colder than before. As if the dome was already starting to take winter seriously.

Down in the factory halls it was darker. Not completely dark, but the light was unreliable. Some lamps flickered. Others burned too brightly. Shadows fell at the wrong angles.

"That's the core," Fenna murmured. "It's drawing heat out of the system."

"He makes everything brittle," said Brann.

They reached the central workshop area, a place where one doesn't normally run because sensitive things are kept there: machines that spin magical threads, shelves full of unfinished wonders, and an area that was only called the "core room" because nobody likes to say out loud that there is a heart that can be lost.

Guards stood in front of the core room – or rather, they stood there as if they had forgotten why they were standing there.

"What's going on?" Fenna shouted.

A guard blinked as if he were falling out of a dream. "We... we didn't hear an alarm."

Fenna felt a prick. "Silent night. He's turned off the warning."

Brann pushed past. "Then wake up. Open up!"

The guard reached for the handle, hesitated. "We mustn't..."

"When the core gets cold, you can do anything," Brann growled.

Fenna raised the compass. The dark threads lay here like mist. And in this mist, Fenna felt something else: cold. Not air cold. Something that creeps into your bones, even though you're indoors.

The door opened.

The core room was... different than Fenna had expected.

She had imagined something like a furnace, something glowing, something that could be worked with tools. Instead, it was a room that looked like a cross between a workshop and a chapel. In the center stood the sled core: a large, round body made of metal and wood, encased in a frame of runic strips. It was connected by wires, threads, and small gears—like a complicated heart constructed because one doesn't have enough faith in natural hearts.

Normally, Fenna knew, the core glowed. Warm. A soft, golden light that you feel more than you see.

Now it was not glowing.

He was tired.

And a fine frost lay over its surface, as if someone had taken it from the night and placed it in this room to mock it.

"He is... frozen," Jaro whispered.

Brann stepped closer, but stopped abruptly, as if the room had imposed a boundary. "This feels wrong."

Fenna raised the compass. The dark current drew directly into the core. And in between, like a fine, artful crack, was something that looked like... a splinter. A black splinter lodged in a joint.

"Malrik's splinter," Fenna whispered.

Jaro stared at the shard. "He... he put something in it."

Fenna nodded slowly. "He didn't just upset the core. He wounded it."

Brann growled. "Then we'll pull the splinter out."

Fenna looked at the rim. At the wires. At the rune bars. One wrong move here could tear everything apart.

"Don't just pull," Fenna said. "He wants us to be rough."

"I'm always rough," Brann growled.

"Then be good today," said Fenna.

Brann stared at her as if she had just told him to write a poem. Then he exhaled and said, "Tell me how."

Fenna reached for the frost light bottle in her suitcase. It was almost empty. Almost. And that old song... that was at the Heart Tree. Not here.

"We don't have much frost light left," Fenna whispered.

Jaro swallowed. "I... I can help."

Brann growled immediately. "You can—"

"He can help," Fenna said sharply. "If he wants to. And if we let him."

Jaro looked at Fenna. There was fear in his eyes. But also determination. The genuine kind, not the manipulated kind.

"Tell me," whispered Jaro, "what I should do."

Fenna looked at the core, the rim, the black shard. And in the compass she saw the currents, which were not just soot, but... structure.

"You were holding the cables earlier," Fenna said. "You know the lines. You know the path of the beat."

Jaro nodded slowly.

"Then you have to find the rhythm in here again," said Fenna. "Not the wrong one. The real one. And you have to keep it while we loosen the splinter."

Brann growled. "And what if he messes it up?"

Fenna looked at Brann. "Then we'll all screw it up."

Brann remained silent.

Fenna moved closer to the core, so close that she could feel the frost on her skin. A coldness that didn't come from the air, but from the feeling that something important was ending.

She dipped her fingertips into the last frosty light and carefully stroked the crack where the splinter was stuck.

For a moment, the frost became clearer, as if it were transparent. The dark shard stood out more distinctly.

The kernel made a sound.

Not a hum.

A soft crackling sound.

It's as if something inside is holding its breath.

"Now," Fenna whispered.

Jaro placed both hands on a rune board, closed his eyes and began to hum.

It wasn't a song Fenna knew. It wasn't a cheerful song. It was a work song. A rhythm of breath, of concentration, of trying not to lose herself.

The compass vibrated.

The bright streams flickered briefly.

The kernel responded – very faintly – with a hint of warmth.

Brann leaned forward, placed a small tool against the joint, so carefully that Fenna hardly recognized him.

He began to loosen the splinter.

And somewhere in the factory, very high up, Fenna heard bells again.

Not chaotic.

Once.

Then silence.

As if someone were counting.

The black splinter sat in the metal like an evil word in a good sentence: small, but exactly where it made everything tip over.

Brann worked with a patience that Fenna had always considered a myth in him. He positioned the tool, not prying, but feeling. Millimeter. Breath. Millimeter. A man who normally persuaded doors by smashing them down treated this splinter as if it were a shard of glass in a child's hand.

Fenna held the compass so close to the crack that the glass almost touched the rim. The currents inside were a jumble of bright flickering and dark mist, but there, right around the shard, was a knot—not large, but tight. A kind of small knot of resentment, into which Malrik had stuck his fingers.

Jaro continued humming. His humming was quiet, but it had rhythm. Fenna noticed how his breathing became calmer the longer he hummed, as if he were pulling himself out of the soot. It wasn't a pretty song. It was an honest one.

And the work appreciated honesty.

The core emitted that soft cracking sound once more, but this time it didn't sound like fear. It sounded like a joint opening up again.

"Almost," Brann murmured.

Fenna felt her heart climb somewhere into her throat and sit there now, as if it had a better overview.

"Don't pull," she whispered. "If he comes loose, let him come out by himself."

Brann growled, but it sounded affirmative. He turned the tool slightly, released the pressure, then applied it again, then released it again. A dance, only without music. Or perhaps with music after all, only Jaro's humming instead of a violin.

Then, quite suddenly, the splinter broke away into a crack.

Fenna saw it first on the compass: the dark knot flickered as if it had been deprived of air. The frost at the joint thinned. A hint of warmth rose.

Brann paused. "He's moving."

"Leave him alone," Fenna whispered.

The splinter slipped another millimeter.

And then – as if the factory were offended that its problems were being solved so quietly – the air in the core room suddenly became heavy.

Not warm. Heavy. As if someone had put a blanket over the voices.

Fenna felt her thoughts slow down briefly.

"Soot," she whispered.

The compass showed it immediately: the fog was seeping into the room, not through doors, but through the system itself. Malrik had sent the soot into the pipes, and the core room was a junction. The soot arrived here like a message.

Brann cursed softly. Jaro paused in his humming, for just a heartbeat.

Fenna looked sharply at Jaro. "Go on."

Jaro swallowed and continued humming, this time louder. Not loud enough to be beautiful. Loud enough to keep himself going.

The air became even heavier.

And then they heard it.

Not a single bell.

Not many.

Just one, far away, very quiet.

A single sound, falling like a drop in water.

Fenna felt the compass react. The sound sent a small ripple through the currents.

"Midnight," Brann whispered.

"Not yet," Fenna whispered. "But he counts."

The splinter slid out further, slowly, as if resisting. Malrik's little evil word wouldn't leave the sentence.

Fenna reached for a pair of pliers and held them ready. Not to pull, but just to catch the splinter if it came out. You don't just drop poison on the ground and hope it will behave itself.

Brann removed another millimeter.

Jaro hummed, his forehead glistening with sweat, even though the room was cold.

Then the splinter gave way.

He slipped out.

Nothing spectacular. No bang. No smoke.

He simply fell into Fenna Zange, as if he had suddenly forgotten why he was there.

The moment the shard left the core, something happened that both relieved and frightened Fenna:

The core hummed.

A very deep tone, warm but not gentle. It sounded like an engine restarting, but still angry that it had been allowed to cool down.

The frost on the surface melted in fine lines. Heat flowed through the pipes. The lanterns in the corners of the room flickered briefly – and then burned more steadily.

Fenna exhaled so forcefully that it was almost a sob.

Brann slumped his shoulders. "Good."

Jaro stopped humming and almost collapsed, but recovered himself at the runeboard.

"I... held it...,” he whispered, as if he himself hadn’t believed he could.

“Yes,” said Fenna. “You have.”

And at that exact moment, upstairs in the factory, they heard a noise that made Fenna's joy disappear from her body:

A long, deep crack.

Not from the core.

From the glass.

The dome.

Brann raised his head. "What was that?"

Fenna looked at the compass. The bright streams were clearer, but the soot haze hadn't cleared. And the crack in the dome—the thin flash—had lengthened. Not much. But enough for Fenna to feel it.

"The core was only part of it," Fenna whispered.

Alva's words came back to her: The supply is just the band-aid. The crack runs deeper.

"Malrik has several knives," Brann growled.

"And we only have two hands," Jaro whispered.



Fenna placed the black shard in a small metal box and closed it tightly. The box immediately felt heavier, as if the shard had weight even without contact.

"He's not finished," said Fenna.

Brann snorted. "He never was."

A guard rushed into the core chamber, out of breath. "Dome support Northeast! There's a cracking sound! And the alarm bells... they're silent! We hear nothing, but we see..."

He broke off because words are sometimes too slow.

Fenna grabbed the compass. "We're leaving," she said.

Jaro blinked. "Where to?"

Fenna looked up as if she could see the crack in the sky through the ceiling and beams. "Towards the dome," she said. "Before it decides it no longer wants to be a dome."

Brann reached for his knife and put it away as if it were a promise.

"And Malrik?" Jaro asked.

Fenna closed the suitcase, the frost light almost empty, but the core warm again. "Malrik," she said, "has realized now that we don't just hunt him. We repair him. And that makes him..."

She was searching for the word.

Brann found it "furious."

Fenna nodded. "Very much."

They ran back out again, back into the factory halls, back into a night where alarm was no longer just a sound, but a question: Is anyone still listening?

## The Heart Tree

When Fenna ran out of the core room, the factory was warmer again, but not more calming.

Warmth offers no comfort on such nights. Warmth is merely a reminder that there is still something that can die.

The lanterns in the corridors burned more steadily, yes – but the light was still... harsh. It cut shadows out of the walls, and in every shadow, an idea could be lurking, whispering to you: Find someone to blame. Find a reason to yell at someone. Find a shortcut, even if it leads you downstairs.

"Dome support North-East," Fenna said, more to himself than to the others.

Brann ran beside her, heavy and fast. Jaro stumbled behind, still dazed, but on his feet. The guard led, too fast for his own lungs.

As they turned out of the workshop towards Polarhof, Fenna heard the sounds before she saw the people: a strained creaking that did not come from wood, and the irregular, nervous ringing of individual bells that could not decide whether to warn or remain silent.

"This is not normal," gasped the guard.

"Nothing is normal," Brann growled. "That's the point."

They entered the Polar Courtyard, and Fenna almost stopped.

The heart tree glowed more intensely than before. Not bright, but alive. The sack containing the old song still lay against the trunk, held tightly like a bandage, and one could see that the bark around it was no longer so dull. A little warmth had worked its way back into the wood.

But above them...

The crack in the dome was larger.

Not much bigger – glass doesn't grow in seconds – but visibly bigger. It had branched out like a fine spider's thread, and tiny crystals sparkled at one end of the crack. Frost.

Dome glass liked warmth. It liked rhythm. It didn't like sudden cold.

Klirr stood beneath the northeast girder, her gaze fixed upwards, arms folded as if she could prevent the glass from shattering with sheer severity. Guards stood on scaffolding, had strung ropes, and erected supports. Elves carried beams and metal struts like improvised ribs.

Marei knelt by the heart tree. Alva stood behind her, one hand on the trunk, the other on the sack, as if comforting a child. Tilo stood beside her, looking as if he had learned in the last few minutes that breathing is a choice.

"Fenna!" Marei exclaimed when she saw her. "What's the kernel like?"

"Warm," Fenna gasped. "We got the splinter out."

Marei closed her eyes briefly, and Fenna saw relief, which immediately turned back into worry. "Good. But the tree—"

"I know," said Fenna. "He's better, but not yet... stable."

Alva nodded. "The bandage is holding," she said, "but the wound underneath is still there."

Fenna looked at the compass. The currents at the heart tree were clearer than before. The dark knot at the roots still pulled, but it was no longer unimpeded. The old core of the song offered resistance.

But around the knot, Fenna saw something new that made her stomach clench: fine dark threads stretching from the knot into the air, like spider webs made of soot.

"He split it up," Fenna whispered.

Brann growled. "He's the Splitbeard. Of course he splits."

"No," said Fenna, her eyes on the compass. "I mean... he's distributing the knot. Not just one point anymore. Many small ones."

Marei stood up, her hands trembling slightly. "Then he can't just sabotage one place anymore. Then—"

—then the heart tree will be everywhere," Tilo murmured.

"And it can hurt anywhere," said Fenna.

The clanging sound grew closer. "The dome support isn't holding," she said tersely. "We're bracing it, we're tensioning it, we're patching it up. But the glass follows a rhythm we can no longer reliably control."

Fenna looked up. The crack stretched across the glass like a thin scar. Outside it was night. And somewhere above lay the sky, cold and vast, waiting for no solutions.

"Where is Santa Claus?" Fenna suddenly asked.

Marei blinked. "Up."

"At Malrik's," Alva said quietly.

Fenna felt a pang. She had left him there as a distraction, as a door that shouldn't be open. And now... he was alone with Malrik, and Malrik was a knife that liked to saw at doors.

"We must help him," Brann said immediately.

Klirr raised his hand. "You won't go anywhere if the support beam cracks. If the dome breaks, it will fall. And if it falls, it won't help anyone."

Brann ground his teeth.

Fenna looked at the compass. The dark veil at the top was still there, somewhere on the tower. But something else was clearer: a movement in the net that was not Jaro, not the core, not the dome.

A dark spark that moved across the courtyard.

"He is here," Fenna whispered.

Marei froze. "Malrik?"

Fenna nodded. "Not up there. Here. Or... his influence. Someone is bringing his rhythm to the courtyard."

Klirr immediately produced a small bugle, didn't blow it because noise was dangerous, but merely raised it. The guards understood. They moved closer together. Eyes scanned.

And then, in the middle of this tense circle of people, tree and glass, something happened that Fenna had not expected:

The heart tree hummed more loudly.

Not like before. Not like a heart struggling. It was a real beat. Warm. Deep. As if the tree were straightening up.

Everyone paused briefly.

"He... reacts," Tilo whispered.

Alva tightened her hand on the trunk. "He can hear us."

Marei looked at Fenna. "Or he hears him."

Fenna looked at the compass. The bright currents on the trunk suddenly thickened. A larger circle formed, like a wave. And in this wave – very briefly – was a pattern that Fenna had seen before:

The star-circle-line symbol.

"That's a door," Fenna whispered.

"What?" asked Brann.

Fenna stared at the trunk. "The Heart Tree is not just a tree. It is... a connection. A kind of... core door."

Klirr stepped closer. "You're telling me, at the worst possible moment, a door opens here?"

Fenna nodded slowly. "I think... yes."

Marei took a sharp breath. "Alva said the rift runs deeper. Beneath the roots. Beneath the song."

Alva nodded. "And sometimes," she said softly, "a heart shows you the way when you can no longer force it."

The tree trunk glowed more intensely. The bag containing the old song vibrated slightly, as if it were resonating in sync with the wood. And precisely where Fenna had seen the symbol on the compass, a fine line appeared in the wood. Not a crack. A seam.

A door seam.

"Don't touch it!" Klirr shouted immediately.

Fenna raised her hands. "I'm not grasping. I'm looking."

The tree hummed once more, and the seam in the wood opened a crack.

Not big. Not enough for a person.

But enough to show something.

A narrow glimpse in the darkness.

And out of this darkness came a breath of cold air that didn't smell of winter, but of... old cellars. Of the underground. Of the source.

Fenna felt the compass in her hand calm down, as if it had said: Finally.

"That's the way down," Fenna whispered.

Brann growled. "Under the tree."

"Under the heart," Alva said.

Klirr looked up at the dome, then at the tree, then at Fenna. Her eyes were sharp. Her voice was short. "You're not going in there alone."

Fenna nodded. "I know."

Marei stepped forward. "I'm coming."

Tilo made a noise as if he were about to protest, but Alva put her hand on his shoulder. "You're staying," she said.

Tilo swallowed. "I... I understand it. I hate it. But I understand it."

Jaro stood still, his hands empty, his eyes on the seam of the door in the tree. "This is... real."

"Yes," said Fenna.

Brann stepped next to Fenna. "Then get down."

Fenna looked up at the dome one last time. The crack creaked. Glass was stretched. Time was running out.

And the heart tree – this huge, warm thing – offered them a door, as if it were saying: If you want to save me, you have to go where it hurts.

Fenna took a deep breath.

"Then we'll go," she said.

The door in the heart tree did not open like a door.

It opened up like a decision.

Fenna had never experienced wood showing such hesitation, but that's exactly what it did: The seam in the trunk pulled apart, not jerkily, not mechanically, but slowly, as if the tree itself had to test whether it truly trusted them. A heart doesn't grant just anyone access to its ribs.

The crack was narrow at first, like a breath. Then it widened, just enough for Fenna to recognize the darkness beyond as a space, not merely as a lack of light. Cold air poured from within, but not the clean chill of winter. This cold smelled of stone, of old dust, of things hidden beneath other things. Of secrets that no longer remembered why they were once important.

Brann leaned forward as if to threaten the darkness. The best way to threaten darkness is with a broad cloister and a forehead that has seen many doors.

"That's a very bad idea," Klirr growled behind them.

"Yes," said Fenna.

"You're leaving anyway."

"Yes," Fenna said again.

Klirr exhaled, as if she were briefly counting the air to make sure there was enough left. "You'll be back," she said, and it didn't sound like hope, but like an order.

"We'll give it a try," said Fenna.

"Trying is the word people use when they know they are lying," Brann growled.

"Then we'll be lying well," said Fenna.

Marei stepped beside Fenna, her hands still cold from the trunk, but her eyes bright. "If the tree is showing us this, then..." She let the sentence hang in the air, because one doesn't like to finish sentences like these. There are things one doesn't want to say aloud because that makes them more real.

Alva stayed outside. Her hand rested on the trunk, as if holding its pulse, while the others descended into the depths. She looked at Fenna, and in that look lay not only concern, but also a time-honored wisdom: You don't save a heart by running around it.

"Listen," Alva said softly. "There's more than just soot down there. There's memory down there. And memory can bite."

Fenna nodded.

"And Fenna," Alva added, "if you find something down there that strongly agrees with you – then be suspicious."

Fenna swallowed. That was exactly Malrik's poison. Being right. He loved it so much that he offered it to others like honey and then watched them get stuck in it.

Fenna gripped the suitcase tighter; inside lay the small metal container with Malrik's splinter. It wasn't heavy, but it felt like a guilt that could never be wiped away.

Klirr made a hand gesture, and two guards approached, keeping their distance from the door as if it were an animal that might snap shut. Fenna understood. You don't have to touch everything that's open.

"We're leaving," said Fenna.

Brann went in first because Brann always goes first. Not out of heroism. Out of habit. Habit is sometimes braver than courage because it doesn't have time to practice fear.

Fenna followed. Marei followed behind.

The darkness didn't swallow them up immediately. At first, there was still the glow of the heart tree behind them, warm, reddish-gold. Then it faded, like a door closing, only instead of a creak, there was a deep tone, a rumble that Fenna felt in her chest.

The tree closed the seam behind them.

They stood in a corridor made of roots.

Not "roots" as described in a textbook. But roots like muscles, thick, twisted, alive, as if someone had woven a network of wood veins into the ground. The walls weren't smooth. They were... organic. And between the roots, tiny points glimmered, as if minuscule remnants of light had lingered there.

"This is...", Marei began.

"Rude," Brann finished.

Fenna would have laughed if her belly hadn't been so tight. "That's the underbelly," she whispered. "The part of the work that never gets any visitors."

"The part that still carries us," said Marei.

The ground was firm but uneven. You didn't walk, you felt your way. Footsteps were quiet because the wood absorbed everything. Even your own breathing sounded muffled, as if the tree had decided that sounds down here were private property.

Fenna raised the star compass. In the glass, the currents were clearer, no less dangerous, but more distinct. The bright lines ran through the roots like blood vessels. And in between: dark threads. No longer nebulae, but veins that didn't belong there.

"That way," said Fenna.

The path led deeper, past places where the roots became so narrow that Brann had to squeeze through sideways. He growled as he did so, not out of fear, but because the confinement offended him.

"If I ever get rich," he murmured, "I'll buy myself a room. A big one. Without roots."

"You would get bored after five minutes," said Fenna.

"I would yell at him," Brann said. "That's entertainment."

They came to a place where the roots suddenly stopped, so abruptly, as if someone had cut the wood and said: From here on there is no more heart, from here on there is something else.

The ground turned to stone.

Old rock, damp, cold. The air down here smelled even more like a cellar. And of something Fenna didn't like: burnt sugar.

"Resentment," whispered Marei.

Fenna nodded. That wasn't just soot from fire. That was soot from feeling. And feeling burns longer.

The passage led into a larger room. Not huge, but high enough that Fenna felt as if she were standing beneath a blanket of shadows. In the center stood something that didn't belong in this work: a large ring of dark material, set into the stone. Like a circle that had once served a purpose and then been forgotten until someone needed it again.

There were marks around the ring. Not footprints. Marks in the stone. Abrasion marks, scratches, as if someone had moved heavy objects. Or as if someone had danced down here, but with very unsuitable shoes.

Fenna felt the compass vibrate. The dark current was moving directly toward the ring. That was... the source. Or at least: the valve.

"That's not the tree," Marei whispered. "That's... underneath it."

"Sometimes a heart has more than one chamber," Fenna murmured.

Brann stepped to the edge of the ring and leaned forward. "That's a hole."

"That's a shaft," Marei corrected automatically, because Marei was the type of person who liked to call things by their correct names, even when they were in a nightmare.

Fenna crouched down and shone her small lamp into the shaft. It was deep. Very deep. And from the depths came a sound, so quiet you felt it rather than heard it: a humming. Not warm. Not friendly. A humming like a melody played backward.

Fenna swallowed. "That's the wrong beat."

Marei nodded, and her voice suddenly became very serious. "If the rhythm is ingrained down here, then it can't let go of the tree above as long as this is working."

Brann growled. "Then we'll plug it up."

Fenna looked at him. "With what? Your charm?"



Brann bared his teeth. "With everything I've got."

"If you just slam it shut," Marei said quietly, "it will express itself elsewhere. Like steam. Or like anger."

Fenna felt Alva's warning echoing within her: Distrust what justifies your actions. And right now, the impulse to simply destroy something felt very... right. Very satisfying. And that's precisely why it was dangerous.

They suddenly heard a soft clicking sound.

Not from them. Not from the stone.

From somewhere in the shadows.

Brann turned immediately, knife in hand. Fenna raised the compass, because sometimes it shows not only currents, but also lies.

A figure emerged from the shadows.

Not Malrik.

That was the first thing that both relieved and worried Fenna. Malrik was at least a face one could hate. This figure was something else entirely.

An eleven.

Old. Thin. His cap pulled low over his face. And in his hand... a bell. Not a small reindeer bell. An old workshop bell, heavy, made of dark metal.

He didn't smile. He looked at them as if they were too late.

"You are down," the elf said quietly.

Fenna blinked. "Who are you?"

The elf lifted the bell slightly, as if in reply. "I was the one who used to listen down here," he said. "Before they decided that you didn't need to listen down here anymore."

Marei took a step forward. "Guard?"

The elf nodded. "That's what they called it. Then they forgot about me. And being forgotten is... a very good breeding ground."

Fenna felt her neck go cold. "You work for Malrik."

The old elf laughed softly, dryly. "Malrik believes everyone is working for him. That's his consolation."

Brann growled. "Then what do you work for?"

The elf looked towards the shaft. The humming rose slightly, as if it were listening. "For what's down here preventing everything up top from being simply... beautiful," he said.

Fenna felt the sentence trying to pull at her. If she hadn't heard Alva's warning, it probably would have felt like the truth. As it was, it felt more like a very polished lie.

"You want us to do something," Fenna said.

The elf nodded. "Yes."

"What?"

He lifted the bell, and Fenna suddenly recognized the pattern: star, circle, line – etched into the metal. The same symbol as on the tree. Like on the compass. Like a language that uses the same letters everywhere, whether written upside down or upside down.

"You must build the bridge," the elf said quietly.

Brann stared at him. "Which bridge?"

The elf pointed at the shaft. "That snow bridge up there was just snow," he said. "Down here you need something that won't break. Otherwise you'll fall—and the tree will fall with you."

Fenna felt her heart race. "A bridge... for what?"

The elf looked at her, and his gaze was suddenly like a blow with cold cloth. "To the source," he said.

And at that same moment, the compass vibrated so strongly that Fenna almost dropped it.

A dark breath rose from the shaft, thin as breath. And in that breath lay a feeling that Fenna disliked because it was so tempting:

Resentment that says: You're right. It was unfair. Destroy it.

Fenna clenched her hand into a fist, not to hit, but to hold herself down.

"No," she whispered.

Marei looked at her sharply. "Fenna?"

Fenna exhaled. "He's trying to feed us," she said. "The soot. He wants us to get angry."

Brann growled. "Then we won't get angry. We'll..."

"Stubborn," said Fenna.

Brann grinned. "I can do that."

The old elf held the bell still. "If you are not angry," he said softly, "you must be something else. And that is more difficult."

Fenna looked towards the shaft, towards the darkness, towards the humming.

"Then we will become difficult," she said.

"Being difficult" sounded like an insult hurled in a workshop when someone screwed in a screw the wrong way for the third time. But down here, in the stone beneath the heart of the factory, it suddenly sounded like a strategy.

The old elf still held the bell aloft as if it were an identification badge. The symbol on it – star, circle, line – looked in the cold light like a subtle threat disguised as a warning.

Fenna felt the soot from the shaft on her skin, not physically, but more in her mind. A thin film of thoughts: You're right. You may. You must. The work was unfair. Make it quiet.

She thought of Alva's warning and clung to it like a railing.

"Tell me," Fenna said to the old elf, "why you are helping us."

The elf didn't smile. He looked at her as if the question were a luxury. "Because I can hear down here," he said. "And I can hear when a heart stops beating."

"And Malrik?" Brann asked. "Can you hear him too?"

"I hear him like a wrong note," said the elf. "He is loud in his head. And quiet in his guilt."

Brann made a noise that sounded almost like agreement.

Marei stepped closer to the shaft and leaned forward. "What exactly do you mean by bridge?"

The old elf pointed down into the depths with the bell. "There's a path down there. People used to walk it when they needed to reset the rhythm. When the heart tree above became diseased, they went to the spring and..."

"...applied a new bandage," Fenna murmured.

The elf nodded. "But the path is no longer safe. It was deliberately made unreliable. They didn't want anyone using it."

"Who wanted that?" asked Fenna.

The elf shrugged. "The factory wanted peace and quiet. Peace and quiet is often just fear wrapped in a beautiful cloak."

Fenna felt the sentence pull at her. Yes, a part of her thought, that's true. And therein lay the danger: the soot turned true statements into traps.

"And Malrik reopened it," said Marei.

"Yes," said the elf. "But not to heal. To disrupt. He has painted the old paths with his rhythm."

Fenna raised the compass. The dark current was indeed spiraling around the shaft, as if someone had created a whirlpool of incorrect rhythm down there.

"So we need a bridge," said Fenna, "that doesn't listen to its beat."

"Exactly," said the elf.

Brann folded his arms. "And how do you build a bridge over a hole that leads to hell?"

The elf looked at him. "You're using what is its opposite up here."

"Light?" Marei advised.

"No," said the elf. "Snow."

Brann blinked. "Snow? We're underground."

The elf nodded. "Snow isn't just outside. Snow is a state of being. A material the North Pole knows. The Heart Tree knows it. It stores it. It stores everything."

Fenna suddenly understood. Not completely, but enough for her mind to click. "You mean... heart snow."

"That's what they called it," said the elf. "Condensed frost that is not only cold, but also structured. It sustains because it follows the rhythm of the heart, not the rhythm of soot."

Marei took a sharp breath. "Then we need the heart tree ourselves."

"Or what he gives away," Fenna said.

The elf nodded. "You can't just go down. You must first... build a snow bridge that holds you down. Otherwise, you'll become part of the whirlpool."

Brann growled. "How are we going to build them? We don't have any snow here."

The elf held the bell still, as if pausing. "You have the song," he said.

Fenna swallowed. "The old song is up in the tree."

"And it opens the door," said the elf. "It can also... condense. It can create structure out of air."

Fenna felt things fall into place, like gears finally meshing – and that was both satisfying and terrifying, because it meant: This is no longer just a problem that can be solved with tools. This is a problem that must be solved with trust.

"We need to get back to the door," Fenna said.

Marei nodded immediately. "And we need to tell Alva that she's using the song... differently."

Brann growled. "And we have to make sure the soot doesn't wipe our brains out first."

Fenna looked towards the shaft. The wisp of soot rose, thin, enticing. It whispered: Stay. Pull. Tear. Destroy it.

"We are going," said Fenna, more towards ourselves than towards others.

The old elf stepped aside. "If you go back upstairs," he said, "Malrik will feel it. He senses every attempt to not be the way he wants you to be."

"Then he'll feel it," Brann growled.

"He will pressure you," said the elf. "He will urge you on. He will agree with you."

Fenna nodded. "Then we'll remain stubborn."

They went back through the root tunnel. The darkness now seemed less random, more like a body observing them. Fenna held the compass in front of her, and every time the dark current tugged at her thoughts, she briefly rang the small bell in her pocket, barely audible, but enough to remind herself that it could have its own rhythm.

The door in the heart tree opened again, as if it had been waiting for it.

They stepped back into the Polar Courtyard, and the air up there suddenly felt... far too vast. The crack in the dome was there, the scaffolding was up, Klirr shouted orders without raising his voice. Marei immediately ran to Alva.

Fenna saw the tree. It glowed. It was alive. And now she knew: It could do more than hum. It could build.

"Alva," Marei said quickly, and Fenna joined her. "The path to the spring is open, but we need a snow bridge. Heart snow. Condensed with the song."

Alva blinked, and Fenna saw her eyes briefly age even more. Then she nodded. "Of course," she said softly. "Of course. The old song isn't just sound. It's form."

A clattering sound came closer, sharp. "You were down there," she said. No question. A statement of fact.

"Yes," said Fenna. "And we have to go down again. But not like this."

Klirr looked at the crack in the dome, then at the heart tree, then at Fenna. "If you go down and the dome cracks, you'll be buried."

"If we don't go down," Fenna said, "it'll tear anyway."

Klirr pressed her lips together. It was the kind of moment where Klirr usually finds a solution, because she has to. This time, she only found truth.

"How much time?" Klirr asked.

Alva placed her hand on the bag, feeling its pulse. "Not much," she said. "Midnight has already passed. The next note will be... difficult."

In response, as if the world were a bad orchestra, they heard a bell somewhere in the factory.

Once.

Clear.

Then silence.

Fenna felt the heart tree respond – not with fear, but with a deeper hum. A defiant hum.

"Good," Fenna said quietly. "Then we'll make it difficult."

Alva nodded. "Then we'll build a bridge that won't break when Malrik pulls on it."

Fenna looked at the sack, at the tree, at the seam of the door. She felt the compass in her hand become calmer, as if it had said: Yes. This is the way.

And somewhere, far away, but perceptibly, Malrik perhaps laughed softly, because he believed they were finally running in the direction he had planned.

This time, Fenna thought, he would be wrong.

## Sparks from fire

If you want to build a bridge out of snow, the most important thing is not the snow.

The most important thing is the belief that snow will behave if you address it politely enough.

Fenna stood with cold fingers by the heart tree, and the heart tree hummed beneath the sack of the old song, as if it had done all this before and was still surprised each time by how strangely humans behaved. Around her reigned the noise of the Polar Court: the scraping of supports against snow, the creaking of scaffolding, the frantic whispers of elves who had tried not to panic and were now failing because panic is very good at disguising itself as "haste".

Klirr had restored order – not the comfortable order one has after a tidy day, but the strict order established in disasters, by deciding who is allowed where and who should please finally stop waving their hands around. She stood close to the crack in the tree door and peered inside as if observing an enemy hiding below.

"You said the song can be condensed," said Klirr.

"It can give form," said Alva, holding the sack containing the old song tightly to the trunk. "It can make something out of breath that sustains."

Brann snorted. "Breath usually only carries me when I'm angry."

"Then, for once, don't be angry," said Fenna.

Brann grinned briefly. "You demand a lot from me."

Tilo stood a few steps away, his gaze darting back and forth between the crack in the dome and the heart tree, as if trying to stare at both problems simultaneously to prevent them from secretly multiplying. He looked as if he had to choose between powerlessness and irony, and irony was the only thing he could think of in time.

"So," said Tilo hoarsely, "we're going to make snow now... underground."

"Yes," said Fenna.

"And that's normal," said Tilo.

"No," said Fenna.

"Good," said Tilo. "Because I was just about to say my life has become strange, but it was already strange before, only... less mathematically impossible."

Alva politely ignored him. It was an art she had perfected long before Tilo was born. She placed both hands on the sack and murmured something that didn't sound like a song, but like someone explaining to a stubborn animal that it should please go onto the ramp.

The heart tree hummed deeper.

Fenna felt the air growing colder at the crack in the door. Not like winter. More like the feeling when you place your hand on a stone and realize that the stone has been there for a very long time and doesn't need you.

"Now," Alva said softly.

Fenna held the star compass to the crack in the door, not inside, just close enough for the glass to sense the currents. The bright lines on the compass thickened, like a river gathering before it rushes. And from the crack came a fine breeze that instantly settled on Fenna's eyelashes like frost.

Heart Snow.

Not visible like flakes. More like something that condenses in the air. A breath that suddenly gains weight.

"Do you see that?" whispered Marei, who had moved closer and was now staring at the compass as if it were a map finally becoming honest.

Fenna nodded. "It's gathering."

"Form," Alva murmured. "Not mass. Form is more important. Mass can be added later."

Brann rubbed his hands together. "I like form. Form sounds like something you can wear without it falling in your face."

Klirre pointed towards the crack in the door. "How big does the bridge need to be?"

Fenna thought about the shaft below, the depth, the old ring in the stone. "Large enough that we can safely reach the edge," she said. "And stable enough that the soot-induced rhythm won't immediately... surround it."

Marei nodded. "Then we have to keep the beat up high while we walk down low."

Tilo raised his hand. "Quick question: Who will keep the beat up there when we're down below and possibly dying?"

"You," said Alva.

Tilo blinked. "Me?"

"Yes," said Alva.

"I'm the kind of person who gets nervous if his soup is too hot," said Tilo.

"Then you're exactly right," said Alva. "You'll notice if something goes wrong."

Tilo pressed his lips together. "I feel honored and insulted."

Fenna was about to reply when a noise came from the factory that didn't fit the plan: a dry crackling sound.

Not the creaking of wood. Not the pulling of ropes.

Crackling like sparks.

Fenna turned her head. On the other side of the Polar Courtyard, near one of the large factory doors, a small light flickered. Not lamplight. A flashing light, brief, glaring.

Sparks from fire.

"Oh no," Fenna murmured.

Brann saw it too. "That's not good."

A clatter jerked his head towards the machine. "What is that?"

Another crackle. This time closer. Sparks flew from a wire on a dome support, as if someone had released a handful of glowing gnats. An elf yelled and jumped back. The sparks fell into the snow and hissed, but they didn't die immediately. They glowed, as if they meant business.

"Soot in the lighting system," Marei said immediately, her voice sharp. "It's overheating the transitions."

"He turns light into fire," said Fenna.

Alva pressed his hand harder against the sack. "He wants us to let go."



And that was precisely the trick: whenever sparks fly, every instinct is to run, stomp, extinguish, and rescue. But if they were to detach the sack from the tree now, the door seam would close, and the heart-shaped snow bridge wouldn't form. The ground beneath would remain an open mouth, breathing only soot. And the crack in the dome would continue to grow because the cold would regain control of the system.

Malrik had placed a new game piece on the board.

Not big enough to destroy everything.

Just big enough to make your hands tremble.

"Water!" someone shouted.

"Snow!" shouted someone else, because at the North Pole most of the water is just very offended snow anyway.

A few elves ran to the sparks and threw snow on them. The sparks hissed, went out – and then flared up again in another spot, as if they had legs.

"He's distributing them," Brann growled.

"Like breadcrumbs," said Fenna. "Except these breadcrumbs steal your eyebrows."

Tilo stood there with his mouth open. "Is that... is that normal? I mean... sparks in the snow?"

"No," said Fenna.

"Good," said Tilo. "Then I can continue to panic without feeling ashamed."

Klirr pointed at two guards. "Firefighting teams to the girders. No wild running. If you fall, you fall into the scaffolding. And if you fall into the scaffolding, the scaffolding falls. And if the scaffolding falls, the dome falls. And if the dome falls—"

"—we're losing our spirits," Brann murmured.

Klirr shot him a look that said: I just declared a catastrophe, and you're joking. Brann stood his ground because Brann lives on looks that want to kill him.

Fenna focused on the compass. The currents in the glass showed the sparks as short, bright bursts wrapped in dark threads. Malrik hadn't simply generated the heat. He had guided it. He drew it across the net like a brushstroke.

"He wants us to break down the bridge," Fenna whispered to Marei.

"Or that we build them too hastily," Marei whispered back. "If we rush, we make them weak."

Alva raised her head, her eyes hard. "Then we'll build slowly," she said. "And we'll extinguish without letting go."

Another shower of sparks erupted, this time right at the edge of the Polar Courtyard, closer to the Heart Tree. Fenna felt the heat briefly on her cheek. An elf screamed. The guards stamped snow on it. It sizzled.

And then Fenna saw something that took her breath away: A spark didn't stay in the snow. It jumped. It leaped like a tiny animal, landed on the sack with the old song, and glowed there for a heartbeat, as if considering whether it could light the song.

Fenna lunged forward, swatting away the spark with the palm of her hand without thinking. It hurt immediately. Not badly, but enough to make her curse.

"Fenna!" Marei shouted.

"That's alright," Fenna growled, pressing her hand briefly into the snow. The pain was good. Pain was honest. Soot wasn't honest.

Alva looked at the sack, then at Fenna. "He tried," she said quietly.

"He's testing," said Fenna. "He's checking to see if we flinch."

Brann stepped closer to Fenna. "We don't flinch."

"We flinch," said Fenna. "But we don't drop anything."

Above them, the dome creaked. A quiet, drawn-out sound, as if the glass had just decided it didn't like being part of plans.

Klirr looked up and then back into the courtyard, and Fenna saw Klirr make a decision. Klirr made decisions like other people drink tea: quickly, hot, without asking for the cup.

"Fenna," said Klirr. "You stay by the tree. You keep the pace. Brann goes with a firefighting team. He tears sparks out of the net before they reach the sack."

Brann grinned as if someone had just given him a very specific task. "Finally, I get to be practical again."

"Practical, not angry," Fenna warned.

Brann nodded. "Practically furious."

"This is... better than nothing," Tilo murmured.

Brann ran off, not recklessly, but quickly, and Fenna saw him knock sparks out of wires with a large leather glove, throw snow on them, and pull elves away before they set themselves on fire. He was good at stopping things that acted stupidly.

Fenna stayed by the heart tree. She placed her injured hand on the trunk, feeling the humming. It was faint, but there. And beneath the humming, she felt the heart-snow coldness gathering at the crack in the door, as if the tree were taking a deep breath, drawing frost from within.

"Go on," whispered Fenna.

Alva murmured the old song, not loudly, but enough for Fenna to feel it in her chest. Marei held the compass so the currents wouldn't become turbulent. Tilo stood beside them and did the only thing he was good at, without admitting it: he stayed put. He didn't run away. He endured.

And while sparks flew and were extinguished outside, while the dome creaked and the work flickered, something began to form at the door crack in the heart tree: a fine, solid, glittering structure in the air, like a narrow bridge of frost.

The bridge down.

Not finished.

Not sure.

But it exists.

And at the very moment Fenna saw it, she heard a sound somewhere in the factory that told her: Malrik saw this too.

A soft, mocking ringing of bells.

Only once.

Then silence.

A spark is a tiny thing with excessive self-confidence.

He acts as if he were a fire, when in reality he is only the threat of a fire. But threats are often enough to make people's hands tremble—and Malrik loved trembling hands. They make everything imprecise. And imprecision was his favorite material.

Fenna stood by the heart-shaped tree, one hand on the trunk, the other still cold from the snow, because she had been cooling the burned area. It still stung a little. Pain was a good rope: you could hold onto it so your thoughts wouldn't slip away.

The crack in the trunk now glittered visibly. Heart snow, compacted, in fine layers, as if the tree itself were building a staircase of frost. It looked like a bridge that wasn't yet sure if it truly wanted to be a bridge. A hesitant miracle.

"Not stable yet," said Marei, holding the compass close to the crack. Her voice was quiet, but it had the tone of someone listening to a machine. "It might be carrying... a child."

"Then I'll send Tilo first," Fenna murmured.

Tilo, who heard this, snorted nervously. "I have many qualities, but 'child' isn't one of them. My bones are already aching before I even go down anywhere."

Alva continued murmuring, and the old song vibrated in the bag like a heartbeat remembering the world. There was no melody, at least not one you could whistle. Instead, there was structure. Like someone knitting a blanket without showing the stitches.

In the distance, Brann shouted something, then another elf, then snow hissed on glowing metal. The sparks were still there, but they were being pushed back. Not defeated. Pushed back.

Klirr stood in the courtyard, signaling. She was everywhere without moving, which was probably a talent one only develops from frequently standing in rooms where people become stupid.

"The problem," Marei said suddenly, "is not just the heat from the sparks."

Fenna looked at her. "Then what?"

Marei pointed at the compass. "Look. The sparks are bright flashes. But they hang from a dark thread. The thread... doesn't lead to the dome. Not to the heart tree. It leads—"

"—to the sled core?" Fenna asked.

Marei nodded. "He's using the heat from the core to generate heat in the pipes. He's tapping into it even though we've removed the splitter."

Fenna felt her stomach clench. "Then the splinter didn't hold everything in place."

"The splinter was a wound," Alva said, muttering without stopping. "This is... a habit. A path he had already prepared."

"He laid cables," Fenna whispered.

"He built shortcuts," said Marei. "Like the snow bridge. Only this time made of heat."

Tilo looked back and forth between them. "This is really a very bad time to be creative."

Fenna exhaled. She tasted the soot in the air like a delicate flavor. And she sensed something else: unease. Not just her own. The unease of the factory. When systems are simultaneously too cold and too hot, they become... irritated. And irritated systems break.

"How do we stop the sparks permanently?" Fenna asked.

Marei looked at the compass, then at the heart tree. "By going to the source."

Fenna nodded. Exactly. And Malrik knew it. That's why the sparks. That's why the dome cracked. That's why the silent alarm bells were ringing. Everything was meant to distract her from the one place where she could truly make a difference.

Brann came running back, his face smeared not with soot, but with snow and exasperated determination. "I told the fire to behave," he growled. "It laughed, but I think it took me seriously."

"How bad?" asked Klirr, who appeared next to him as if she had grown out of the ground.

"We have it under control," Brann said. "But it jumps. It jumps, like Fenna said. And it comes back as soon as we look away."

Klirr nodded once. "Then it's steered. Then it's not an accident. Good."

"Good?" Tilo exclaimed. "How can that be good?"

Klirr looked at him. "Because you can only pray against accidents. You can work against plans."

Tilo swallowed. "I'm starting to like you, and that scares me."

Klirr ignored him. "How far is the bridge?"

Fenna pointed to the crack in the door. The heart-shaped snow had solidified into a clear ridge, about an arm's length long, and below it was darkness. It looked as if the tree were building a small staircase into itself.

"Not finished yet," said Fenna. "But it will be."

Alva didn't stop the murmuring, but she briefly raised her head. "It needs a stronger rhythm," she said. "One that doesn't just come from me. I'm old. My voice doesn't carry like it used to."

Fenna felt her throat go dry. "Then..."

Alva looked at her. "Then you have to bear it too."

Fenna blinked. "Me? I can't... I don't know the song."

Alva shook her head. "You don't have to know it. You have to... believe it. You have to get into the rhythm, not think about it."

"That's a very impractical instruction," Brann muttered.

"Impracticality is our specialty today," said Fenna.

She knelt down and placed her hand on the sack next to Alva's. The leather was warm, despite the cold around her. She felt the vibration of the song, deep, old, like a memory that wouldn't go away.

Alva began to murmur again, and this time Fenna tried not to listen like someone trying to learn music, but like someone listening for a door to open. She let the rhythm sink into her chest. Not in her head. In her body.

And indeed, something inside her responded.

Not pretty. Not clean. But honest.

The heart tree hummed.

The crack in the door glittered more intensely.

The heart snow compacted, layer upon layer, and the bridge grew, slowly but surely. One foot. Two. One path.

And while Fenna kept the beat, she suddenly felt the soot mist in the air at the edge of the yard tremble. As if it sensed that its food was about to be gone.

"He can feel it," Marei whispered.

"Of course," Fenna whispered back, without taking her hand off the sack. "He can feel anything that doesn't sound like him."

Klirr approached, quietly, like a decision. "If the bridge holds, you go down. Fenna. Brann. Marei."

Brann nodded immediately.

Marei too.

Fenna exhaled. The thought of going back down into the depths, under the tree, to the shaft, to the spring, while the dome creaked and sparks flew above, was not comforting. It was the opposite of comforting. It was the kind of task that tells you: You can't save everything. Choose.

And that's exactly what Malrik wanted.

"And me?" Tilo asked meekly.

Klirr looked at him. "You stay here. You keep your eyes open. You let us know immediately if the sparks get closer or if the crack moves."

Tilo swallowed. "So I'm officially becoming a nervous seismograph."

"Yes," said Klirr. "Be nervous. But be useful."

Alva continued murmuring, and Fenna kept up until her throat was dry and her heart felt as if it had learned a new rhythm. The bridge of heart-snow continued to grow.

Then something strange happened: One of the silent alarm bells in the courtyard rang.

Only once.

But this time there was no chaos. The tone was clear. An honest tone.

Marei lifted her head. "The song... has reached her."

Fenna felt tears almost coming to her eyes, not from emotion, but from relief: if a bell can ring honestly again, then all is not lost.

Brann grinned. "So we can break it after all."

Fenna kept the beat and whispered: "Not broken. Um."

Another shower of sparks sprayed in the distance – but it sounded smaller. Less confident.

The Heart Snow Bridge was now long enough to put a foot on.

Klirr stepped to the edge and looked down. "If you fall, you're gone," she said.

"We will not fall," Brann growled.

Klirr looked at Fenna. "You only leave if you're sure you'll come back."

Fenna knew that "Klirr" meant an order, and at the same time knew that it couldn't be obeyed. She nodded anyway.

"Just a little more," Alva whispered. "One more hit."

Fenna kept the beat. The heart tree hummed.

And the footbridge grew.

The Herzschnee footbridge did not grow spectacularly.

It grew like something ashamed of having to grow at all. Centimeter by centimeter. Layer by layer. As if, each time the tree formed frost from within itself, it had to briefly test whether this world truly needed a bridge so desperately that it was allowed to tap into its very core.

Fenna held her hand on her crotch, and the rhythm of the old song vibrated within her. Not as a melody, but as an attitude. As: Don't give in. Don't rush. Don't get angry. On a night when everything reeked of anger, that was almost a miracle.

"Now," Marei said softly.

Fenna looked up. The ledge was long enough to lead into the crack in the door like a genuine, cheeky invitation. It didn't end abruptly, but slid into the darkness, as if it continued down there where the light doesn't reach. And the surface didn't just glitter—it seemed solid. Dense. Heart snow, not just frozen whimsy.

Brann stepped to the edge, knelt down, and tapped the table with his knuckles as if checking whether it deserved his respect.

The bridge sounded... solid.

"This thing sounds like it could carry me," said Brann, almost surprised.

"Please take that as a compliment," Fenna murmured.

Klirr stood beside them, her eyes hard. "You're leaving now," she said. "Not because it's convenient, but because we can't wait any longer."

As if in confirmation, the dome above them creaked. A long sound, and Fenna saw a tiny shower of crystals forming at the crack. Not falling, just growing. Frost edges.

"Time is thin," Marei whispered.

"Time is rude these days anyway," Brann growled.

Alva slowly took her hand off the sack, as if letting go of something heavy. Fenna felt the song still playing inside her. It was like an earworm, only this earworm didn't annoy you, but rather straightened your back.

"Don't forget," Alva said softly, "down there the soot isn't just dust. It's an argument. It will give you reasons."

Fenna nodded. "We're not taking any."

Tilo stood a few steps away, looking as if he wanted to scream and pray at the same time and hide behind a lamppost. "If you don't come back," he said, "then... then..."

"Then you have to save Christmas," said Brann, grinning briefly.

Tilo turned even paler. "That's unfair."

"This is Christmas," Brann murmured.

Fenna stepped to the edge. The gap in the tree door was open like a wound, and the walkway led inside. Beyond it: darkness, roots, stone, shaft, spring. And somewhere down there: Malrik's false rhythm, lurking underground like an invisible animal.

Fenna shoved the small metal container with the black shard deep into the suitcase. Then she pulled the small bell out of her pocket and held it up briefly.

"Why the bell?" asked Marei.

Fenna swallowed. "Because I need a sound that isn't his."

Marei nodded. "Okay."

Brann went first, of course. He put his foot on the heart-shaped snow, and for a moment Fenna expected it to crack, to give way, for everything to be a catastrophe, because this was the kind of night that collects catastrophes like other people collect stamps.

But the bridge held.

Brann shifted his weight and took a step into the tree. The frost under his boot didn't crunch. It sounded more... muffled, as if the snow were accepting his footstep.

"It holds," Brann growled.

Marei followed, cautiously but without hesitation. Fenna sensed in her gaze that inquisitive quality: fear, yes, but also curiosity. Marei was afraid of making mistakes, not of the dark.

Fenna exhaled and stepped onto the jetty as the third person.



A chill immediately seeped through the soles of her feet, but it was a clear, distinct cold. Not the sooty kind that pinches you in your thoughts. This cold was like a clear statement: Down here, it's real.

The tree hummed behind her, and then the seam closed.

Not completely. Not like before. Only to the extent that the light outside diminished. The Polarhof, Klirr, Alva, Tilo – they were still there, but as if through a membrane that filters out sound.

"Good," Fenna murmured, more to herself. "Then we're in."

The walkway led them back into the root tunnel, but this time the tunnel seemed... orderly. As if the heart-shaped snow had not only supported them but also brought structure to the depths. The roots glowed in tiny points, and Fenna had the feeling that the tree was not only showing them the way but also somehow protecting them.

Brann went ahead, Marei behind him, Fenna at the back, compass in hand. The currents in the glass were clearer than last time. The bright lines ran like veins, and the dark current was still there—but it seemed less triumphant. More irritated. As if it had sensed that someone was challenging its position.

They reached the transition from root to stone again.

And exactly where before there had only been the smell of the cellar, now there was a different smell in the air:

Smoke.

Fresh smoke.

Fenna stopped. "What is that?"

Marei raised the compass. A bright flicker flickered at the edge of the glass mesh, high above.

"The sparks," Marei whispered. "They've gotten worse."

Fenna swallowed. "Upstairs?"

Marei nodded. "He's pushing harder. When we're downstairs, he'll light the fire upstairs."

Brann growled. "The bastard."

Fenna felt the soot in the air immediately threatening to seize her rage. The old impulse: Strike. Run. Scream. Do something. And that's precisely why it was dangerous.

She reached into her pocket and rang the small bell once, softly.

The sound was tiny, but clear. And for a moment, Fenna felt the soot in her head recede, as if it had been burned.

“Go on,” said Fenna.

They went into the stone room, to the ring, to the shaft. The humming from the depths was still there, backwards, unpleasant, like a song laughing at you.

The old elf stood there again. He hadn't moved. He stood as if he were part of the stone.

"You have the bridge," he said.

"There's a fire upstairs," said Fenna, without any politeness.

The old elf nodded, as if he had expected it. "He will do everything to make you feel guilty," he said. "Guilt is the best leverage. It's lighter than a hammer and lasts longer."

Marei stepped closer to the shaft and looked down. "How far is it to the spring?"

The old elf lifted the bell slightly. "Deep," he said. "And you will hear things that will prove you right. That's his way. The soot turns every thought into a judgment."

Brann growled. "Then we won't judge."

"Then," said the old elf, and this time his voice was almost soft, "you only have to do one thing: Go without getting lost."

Fenna peered into the darkness of the shaft. The Heart Snow Walkway reached to the edge, but not beyond. It wasn't a bridge across the chasm, not yet. It was a bridge to the edge. The rest was... the path.

"How down?" asked Fenna.

The old elf pointed at the ring. "The bridge isn't just horizontal," he said. "Heart Snow can also be... rope."

Marei understood immediately. "We are compacting a ladder."

“Or a railing,” Fenna said.

Brann growled. "I'll take both."

Fenna placed her hand on the Heart Snow Bridge. She felt the rhythm of the old song within her, even though the sack was up high. It was like a rhythm that had been learned once and now stayed with her when she needed it.

She exhaled, concentrating not on the "how" but on the "holding". On form.

Marei held the compass so that the bright streams flowed over the edge of the shaft. Brann stood ready to grab anything within reach, because that was his form of trust.

Fenna felt the heart snow growing on her fingers, not cold, but firm. A strand. Then another. A kind of frosty rope pulling downwards, as if tying down the darkness.

"It is being created," Marei whispered.

Brann grabbed the rope and pulled carefully. It held. Firmly. Reliably.

"Good," Brann growled. "Then down."

Fenna glanced briefly upwards, as if she could see the sparks in the Polar Courtyard through the stone and roots. She couldn't. But she felt the urgency like heat on her skin.

"If Malrik makes a fire upstairs," she whispered, "then we downstairs have to be faster than him."

Marei nodded. "Then we'll change the tempo before it sets everything on fire."

Brann placed his foot on the edge of the shaft and grasped the frosty rope. He glanced once into the darkness, then grinned briefly, as if offended that he was hesitating at all.

"I hate holes," he growled and began to descend.

Fenna followed, the compass on her wrist, the small bell in her pocket, the heart-shaped snow beneath her fingers.

And above them, somewhere far above, glass creaked.

And somewhere, even higher up, sparks flew.

## Fire in the Polar Courtyard

Fire at the North Pole is an outrage.

Not because it can't burn there. It can. Anything can burn if you ignore it long enough, treat it badly enough, or tease it with the right amount of malice. No—fire at the North Pole is presumptuous because it pretends to be something special. As if it's saying: Look, I am heat! And everyone who truly works with heat knows: heat is work, not spectacle.

When the first real fire broke out in the Polarhof, it was small. Tiny, in fact. A speck, a hissing point in the snow, where before sparks had only pretended to become serious.

Then he became serious.

A wire on a dome support glowed brightly, as if someone had lit its tongue from the inside. A second spark jumped, landing not in the snow, but in a pile of dry wood shavings that an elf had dropped in haste earlier. Wood shavings are about as loyal as cats: you can stack them neatly, but they're just waiting for the moment you turn around to suddenly be somewhere else entirely—in this case, in flames.

Tilo saw it first. Tilo wasn't brave, but he was alert. His fear was a radar, and today the air was full of targets.

“There! It’s really on fire!” he cried, and his voice tipped into that tone normally reserved for “I accidentally dropped Santa’s coat into the soup.”

Klirr was already on her way before the sentence was even finished. That was one of her best qualities: she didn't wait for complete information, because complete information is a rare commodity in times of crisis. Klirr worked with what was available, and what was available at that moment was: fire, glass, soot in the air, and a courtyard full of people who had a particular fondness for moving in the wrong direction.

"Fire line! Snow in bags, not in hands! Hands are for thinking!" she shouted, and two guards ran off, carrying heavy linen sacks normally used to carry road salt or unwelcome gifts that smell of fish.

Alva was still standing by the Heart Tree. The sack with the old song was no longer just a bandage; it was an umbilical cord. The door-seam in the trunk glittered faintly; the Heart Snow Trail had been formed. And Fenna, Brann, and Marei were gone, down into the depths where the stone is ancient and the air collects bad stories.

Alva sensed the fire before she saw it. Not because she was magical—although she was probably more magical than she admitted—but because she had known for decades how a work of art feels when it panics.

The heart tree hummed. Not reassuringly. Warningly. A deep tone that said: Something is eating its way through my blood.

Tilo ran towards Alva, but stopped after three steps because he suddenly realized that running erases nothing, except perhaps one's own dignity.

"They're down there," he said breathlessly, as if he had to remind Alva that her favorite people had just disappeared underground while the courtyard played fire.

Alva nodded without taking her eyes off the trunk. "I know."

“And now it’s on fire,” Tilo added, because his brain apparently thought that repetition creates security.

"I know," Alva said again.

A clattering sound moved into her field of vision. "The fire is still small," she said tersely. "But it's in the wrong place. If it spreads to the beams, the dome will crack. If the dome cracks, we'll all be snow in a very impractical state."

Tilo raised his hand. "I would like to officially state that I do not like this picture."

Nobody reacted, which Tilo considered a success.

Alva tightened her hand on the sack. "He's been waiting," she said softly.

Klirr looked at her. "What for?"

“On our hands,” Alva said. “On our attention. He knows that we look away when there’s a fire. He knows that we let go when we’re afraid.”

Klirr pressed his lips together. “We won’t let go.”

“We won’t let go,” Alva confirmed.

Tilo looked back and forth between the heart tree and the fire, as if trying to stare at both at once to stop them from moving faster. “And what about the... the soot?” he asked. “I can taste it. It’s like... like someone dissolving a bad mood in cocoa.”

“That’s pretty much exactly what it is,” said Klirr.

The fire in the yard grew larger. Not tall, but wide. It crept along the ground, consuming wood chips, licking at a wooden frame that had been used for supports. It was in no hurry. It had time. Fire is patient because it knows that everything eventually tires.

“Pour on some snow!” someone shouted, and elves threw snow into piles, too much, too fast. The fire hissed, went out in one spot, and flared up again two steps away. It was as if it had learned how to dodge.

Klirr saw this and didn’t raise her voice. She became quieter. That was worse, because it meant she had reached the point where she was no longer talking to people, but to decisions.

“Don’t throw it,” she said. “Push it. Smother it. And keep it away from the power lines.”

A few guards obeyed. A few elves didn’t, because panic is a poor listener.

Alva closed her eyes briefly, as if checking the rhythm in the bag. The heart-shaped tree was still humming. The door seam was holding. But the humming now had a second undertone, a sharp tremor that didn’t belong to the song.

“He’s pulling,” Alva murmured.

Klirr leaned towards her. “What?”

Alva opened her eyes. “Wanting.”

Klirr stared at her. “Don’t tell me you mean—”

“That’s exactly what I mean,” said Alva.

And then Klirr realized it himself: The people in the courtyard weren’t just hectic. They were... irritable. One elf shoved another because he was in his way. A third shouted that this was all “typical,” without explaining what exactly was supposed to be typical. Someone cursed Fenna because Fenna was gone. Someone cursed Klirr because Klirr was there. Someone cursed the snow because snow apparently isn’t helpful enough unless it’s simultaneously water, sand, and a good argument.

The soot in the air wasn’t just a film. It was an amplifier. It turned every minor frustration into a justification, every annoyance into a mission.

And missions are flammable.

"Stop it!" Tilo shouted suddenly, surprisingly loudly. He wasn't referring to the fire. He meant the people. "Stop yelling at each other! It's burning! That's enough!"

A few heads turned. A few eyes briefly cleared, as if someone had thrown cold water in their faces.

Klirr looked at Tilo. For a heartbeat, she seemed... impressed. Then it was gone again, because she didn't have the time to be impressed.

"Okay," she said. "One more time. Everyone. We extinguish the fire. We hold the tree. We hold the dome. And whoever pushes someone else helps sort presents for three days afterwards, without gloves."

That was a threat everyone understood.

The movement in the yard changed. Less chaos. More pressure. More hands not throwing snow, but grabbing and pressing it. The fire became smaller. Not out, but smaller.

And then, as if that were the answer Malrik had expected, the fire jumped.

Not by a spark. By an idea.

An elf, young and red-faced, suddenly shouted: "It's all because of that song! Because of that tree! Always all this... sentimentality! Maybe we should just let it burn!"

The sentence hung in the air for a moment like a burning piece of paper.

Alva slowly turned around. Her gaze met the young elf, and there was no anger in that gaze. Only something far worse: disappointment, which had every right to be there.

"You think you're right," Alva said quietly.

The elf waved his arms. "I—"

"You think you're right," Alva repeated. "And that's exactly what he just put in your mouth."

The young elf blinked. You could see the soot in his head trying to hold onto the sentence, like a spider that doesn't want to give up its web.

Klirr stepped in. "Guards," she said. "Take him away from the fire. Not roughly. Just away. He needs air that doesn't taste of soot."

The elf protested, but not for long. As two guards led him away, he suddenly seemed very small. Not angry. Just used.

Tilo swallowed. "That was Malrik, wasn't it?"

Alva nodded. "That's his fire. Not that one." She pointed at the flames. "This is just the match."

Klirr looked at the doorway in the tree, which glittered faintly. She knew Fenna and the others were below. She knew that every further breath upstairs was a chance for Malrik to turn the work against each other. She also knew that she couldn't go down because someone upstairs had to keep the beat.

Klirr hated nights like these. Nights when you have to make the right decisions, but they all feel wrong.

The heart tree suddenly hummed a little louder. A short beat, as if it were saying: I'm still holding on. Hurry down there.

Alva placed her hand on the trunk and whispered something inaudible. Perhaps a word. Perhaps a song. Perhaps simply: Please.

The fire in the yard was smaller now, but it wasn't gone. And somewhere in the pipes, heat still smoldered, ready to erupt again as soon as someone looked away.

Klirr raised his head to the dome. The crack sparkled with frost. He was silent. And that was the most uncanny thing about it.

Because silence on that night never meant: everything is alright.

Silence meant: something is waiting.

Fire is when heat suddenly develops ambitions.

At Polarhof, the fire had by now developed not only ambition but also a certain creativity. It didn't simply creep to where there was material to burn – it crept to where it was supposed to burn. As if someone had given the fire a map and told it: Choose the spots where it will hurt the most.

And fire that knows where it hurts is no longer a natural phenomenon. This is deliberate use of flames.

Klirr stood on one of the low snowbanks so she could see over the heads below. She seemed like a piece on a game board, except that she wasn't being moved, but rather forcing the other pieces into motion. Her gaze lingered on the pipes, the supports, the point where the dome girders jutted into the courtyard – and again and again on the heart-shaped tree.

The heart tree was the problem that could not be erased, and the solution that could not be let go.

"Snow blankets! Don't throw them!" Klirr shouted, and this time she didn't sound like someone giving instructions, but like someone insulting fire. "If you throw them, you feed the wind. If you push them, you smother it!"

Two guards hauled over a heavy felt tarpaulin—originally intended to protect delicate workpieces from moisture. Now it was meant to shield flames from their own arrogance. They didn't throw it. They laid it down. With the care of people who understood that fire is fought not only with water, but also with humiliation.

It hissed. Smoke billowed out. The yard smelled of wet wood and hot metal, which is about as pleasant as a burnt candy cane trying to pass itself off as perfume.

Tilo stood beside Alva, resisting the urge to get involved in every drama vying for his attention. He had chosen to be useful today—a particularly audacious form of courage for Tilo, because it meant he couldn't simply talk away what scared him.

"It's getting smaller," he whispered, as if he had to tell the fire itself that, so that it would be ashamed.

"Fire is not ashamed," said Alva.

"I do," Tilo murmured.

Alva held the bag containing the old song by the tree trunk, her hand flat, her fingers still. Her lips barely moved, and the rhythm she murmured wasn't loud enough to be heard—but it was strong enough to influence the courtyard. That was the strange thing about songs: they don't have to be big to carry weight. They only have to be right.

The heart-shaped tree hummed. Sometimes louder, sometimes softer, as if it were breathing. And each time the humming intensified, the soot in the air seemed to recede for the length of a heartbeat. Not because it was afraid of Alva, but because it disliked true form. Soot wanted to soften everything so it could be more easily deformed.

Klirr noticed this too. She saw how a few elves suddenly saw more clearly again, how a hand that had just been trembling became calmer.

"Good," Klirr said quietly, more to himself than to the others. "He can't completely cloud our judgment as long as the tree speaks."

The fire was now spread to two places: a smoldering patch on the frame and a dangerously bright spot on a cable that kept spitting sparks, as if spitting to keep from screaming. The guards were pressing down tarpaulins, tamping snow, and someone had even fetched a bucket of salty meltwater—about as exotic at the North Pole as a banana in a toolbox.

It helped.

For a moment.

Then a spark leaped out from under the tarpaulin like a cheeky animal, landed on a dry bundle of yarn that an elf had dropped in his haste, and immediately resumed its flickering flame. Not large. But determined.

"There! There!" Tilo shouted and pointed, because pointing is a very human form of magic: one hopes that something will become less bad if one names it clearly.

A young security guard jumped up, stepped on it, slipped on the ice, and landed hard on his back. The fire hissed indignantly. The guard cursed, which at least proved he was still alive.

Klirr narrowed his eyes. "That's exactly what he wants," she said.



Alva continued muttering, "That we hurt ourselves while we help others."

"That we hurt each other," Klirr corrected.

And indeed, at the edge of the courtyard, tensions began to rise—not just in the wires, but in the voices. One elf shouted at another for being too slow. The other shouted back because he wasn't slow, but cautious. A third intervened because he had to, otherwise he would have lost his sense of self-importance, and self-importance is also flammable.

"Stop it!" Tilo shouted again, this time with more despair than volume. "Shouting at each other won't put anything out! You'll just create... more smoke!"

"Stay out of it!" someone snarled.

Tilo wanted to snap back. He could already feel it gathering in his throat, that wonderful feeling of finally being right, of finally striking back. The soot in the air awaited it like a feast.

And then Tilo did something that surprised even him.

He laughed.

Not a beautiful laugh. A nervous, inappropriate, but genuine laugh.

"Do you know what's absurd?" he cried, still laughing, his eyes wide. "We're standing here arguing while an evil elf tries to set Christmas on fire! It's so ridiculous I can hardly take it seriously! And if I don't take it seriously, he'll have less power over my head!"

A few elves stared at him.

One of them said, "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about it," said Tilo, and now his voice was suddenly clear, "that you're doing exactly what he wants. You taste soot and think it's your own trouble. It isn't. It's... borrowed. On bad terms."

The word "borrowed" stuck. Perhaps because every elf up here knew how bad it is to borrow something and later return it in a state that reeks of guilt.

Alva briefly raised her head. A tiny spark of pride flickered in her eyes, but it vanished immediately because pride, too, was a luxury these days.

Klirr seized the moment, as if she'd been waiting for someone to clear the air for a second. "Enough," she said calmly. "We're working. No shouting. No blaming. No quick-fire heroes. Anyone who feels the soot in their head should take three steps back, breathe, and then carry on. We're putting out fires, not people."

It was said so simply that it almost sounded like magic.

And because it was simple, it worked.

The activity in the yard became more purposeful again. Someone passed tarpaulins. Someone pushed snow. Someone pulled the bundle of twine away before it finally burst into flames. The fire shrank, hissed, growled, and for a moment it actually looked as if it could be won.

Then the dome creaked again.

Not the quiet, tired crackling from before. A longer sound that traveled through the courtyard, as if glass were stretching – and realizing that it had become too thin in one spot.

Everyone automatically looked up because people are generally interested in the sky as soon as it threatens to come down.

The crack glittered. A tiny shard of frost broke off and fell. Not large, but visible. It landed somewhere in the snow with a soft, barely audible "tck," and that tiny sound was worse than any crack because it said: It has begun.

Klirr swallowed the impulse to swear. She didn't do it out of politeness, but for efficiency. Swearing is sometimes a release, but releases are exactly what Malrik had installed everywhere tonight.

"Tighten the supports," Klirr said immediately. "And no heat to the beams. The fire stays on the ground. If it creeps upwards, we're finished."

"How do you keep a fire on the ground?" Tilo asked, and his voice now sounded less panicked, more practical, which was probably his latest and most confusing development.

"By not offering him anything up top," Alva said quietly, without stopping to murmur.

And at that exact moment, as if the word were a signal, a new spark jumped – not somewhere near the wires, but closer to the heart tree.

He landed on the bark.

A tiny glimmer.

For the length of a heartbeat, everything was still. Even the fire seemed to listen briefly.

Alva didn't pull her hand away. She continued holding the sack, continued murmuring, and with her free hand she stroked the spot on the trunk – not frantically, not wildly, but like someone waking a child without frightening it.

The spark went out.

Not because Alva had expressed it. But because the heart tree, at that moment, hummed deeply, so warmly and so heavily, that the spark, that cheeky little thing, suddenly seemed as it always had: ridiculous.

Tilo let out an audible sigh. "Oh," he said. "The tree can... offend sparks."

"The tree can do many things," said Alva.

Klirr looked at the extinguished spot on the trunk. Then she looked into the yard, at the smaller but still burning fire, at the faces that were clearer again because they were no longer screaming.

"They are down," Klirr said softly, more to the tree than to anyone else.

The heart tree hummed.

In response, a bell rang somewhere in the factory. A single, clear tone, not chaotic, but like a signal.

Klirr raised her head. "That wasn't ours," she said.

Alva paused, for just a breath. "That was... a warning cry."

Tilo swallowed. "From whom?"

Alva looked at the seam in the door frame, which glittered faintly. "From below," she said softly.

And so they knew: The fire up here was only half the story. Something down there had responded. Or fought back.

And the night still had enough time to hurt both sides.

The single bell tone still hung in the air, as if it were not just a sound, but a signpost.

And because it was a night when all signs pointed towards the abyss, everyone reacted incorrectly: they froze. Briefly. Just for a heartbeat. But one heartbeat is enough for Feuer to regain his courage.

One of the flames beneath the felt tarp found a crack, pushed itself out as if to say: Thank you for the break, I was completely out of breath. It greedily licked the edge of the bundle of yarn that someone was about to pull away.

"No, no, no!" gasped the elf, pulling – too hectically, too quickly.

Klirr was faster. Not with her legs, but with her decision. She jumped from the snowbank, grabbed the elf by the collar, and pulled him back as if he were a sack of potatoes with particularly poor self-awareness.

"Don't pull!" she snarled. "Push! Smother! This is fire, not a recalcitrant scarf!"

The elf blinked as if he'd just learned he'd been breathing wrong for years. Then he nodded. In a panic, people are often surprisingly obedient when someone sounds like they've written the manual.

Two guards rushed over, pressed the felt tarp tighter, and stomped snow to the edge, not wildly, but like bricklayers who know that even a small gap will later become a big problem. The fire hissed indignantly, but it found no new outlet.

Tilo stood next to Alva and felt his heart trying to change rhythm – away from panic, towards something that felt like “okay, we might die, but at least it will be in an orderly way”.

“That was from below,” he said again, more to himself, as if repeating it would make the information less sharp. “A warning cry.”

Alva nodded, her eyes fixed on the door jamb in the tree trunk. She looked as if she could hear through wood. “They’re in the shaft,” she murmured.

“How do you know that?” Tilo whispered.

“Because the tree hums differently,” Alva said, as if that were the only plausible explanation in the world. “It hums... conductively. It’s not just carrying itself. It’s carrying footsteps.”

Tilo swallowed. “That sounds like he’s sweating.”

“Trees don’t sweat,” said Alva.

Tilo looked at the glowing log. “Then... what is it?”

“Effort,” Alva said. And the word was so simple that it suddenly explained everything: the crack in the dome, the sparks, the silent alarm bells, the people who wanted to scream at each other. It wasn’t just malice. It was strain.

Klirr approached them without turning away from the flames. That was one of her most astonishing abilities: she could witness two disasters simultaneously without turning her back on anyone. “Did the tree tell you something?” she asked tersely.

“He says nothing,” said Alva. “He points.”

Klirr narrowed his eyes. “What is he showing?”

Alva placed his flat hand on the bark, right next to the extinguished spark. “It’s showing me that something is pressing down there.”

“The soot?” Tilo asked.

Alva nodded. “The soot pushes upwards. And Fenna pushes downwards. In between is the tree. A heart between two hands.”

Tilo tried not to like the picture. He failed.

Klirr looked towards the dome. Another shard of frost broke off, fell, this time closer. A soft “tck” in the snow. Again that tiny sound that said: It has started, and it won’t stop just because you ignore it.

“We need to get the yard clean,” said Klirr. “If the crack opens, glass will fall. And glass doesn’t fall like snow. Glass falls like...”

“Like bad decisions,” Tilo muttered.

Klirr gave him a look that simultaneously meant "yes" and "not now".

She raised her hand. "Everyone out of the fall line! No standing under the northeast beam! Those who are supporting, support from the side! Those who are to extinguish, extinguish on the ground!"

"But the fire—" someone began.

"—is on the ground!" Klirr cut him off. "And if you can't keep the fire on the ground, you've got a whole different problem!"

The elves moved. Not all of them elegantly, but enough. And once again Tilo realized: order isn't pretty. Order is sometimes simply the absence of further harm.

The fire had been contained by now. It hissed under the tarpaulins, still smoldering, but it no longer possessed that cheeky, leaping self-confidence. It was once again what fire actually is: energy that can be controlled if you don't feed it.

"Good," Klirr said quietly. Then louder: "Snowflake flour!"

A few heads turned. "What?"

"Snow flour!" Klirr repeated, and now it sounded as if it had always been a term everyone knew, except, of course, everyone. "Fine snow, dry, sifted! Smothers better! Get it from the storage!"

Tilo stared at her. "We have sifted snow."

"Of course we have sifted snow," said Klirr, without looking at him. "We're at the North Pole. We have a type of snow for everything. We have snow for carrying, snow for polishing, and probably also snow that gets offended if you speak to it incorrectly."

Tilo wanted to object. Then he remembered the Heart of Snow Bridge. He remained silent and accepted that reality up here followed different rules.

Guards ran off, returning with sacks overflowing with fine, dry snow. They carefully scattered it along the edges of the tarpaulins, pressing it down. The fire gave one last angry hiss and collapsed, as if it had suddenly understood that no one wanted to play with it anymore.

The smoke lessened. The air remained sooty, but it was no longer burning. A difference like the difference between "someone is angry" and "someone is already hitting."

Klirr breathed out. Not with relief. More like: one less problem, a hundred left.

Then came the next sound.

Not a single bell.

Not a single splinter falls.

A deep, long crackling sound ran through the polar courtyard, as if the sky itself had clenched its teeth.

The dome.

All heads went up. Even those Klirr had just ordered away. That's how people are: you can warn them about a falling roof, and the first thing they'll do is look up to check if it's actually coming down. It's probably some kind of evolutionary joke.

The crack had lengthened. Not dramatically, not like something out of a movie. But visible. A second, fine line branched off from the main break, like a small side arm, as if the glass were beginning to think new thoughts.

"It's going to get worse," Tilo whispered.

"Yes," said Alva.

Klirr clenched his hand into a fist and forced it open again. "Tighten the supports! Tighten the ropes!"

One of the eleven shouted: "We can't hold this!"

"You can do it," said Klirr, and it wasn't motivation, it was mathematics. "You hold it because you have to. And if you don't hold it, it falls. And if it falls, you can always complain later. Until then, you work."

The elf stared at her. Then he nodded. Sometimes the difference between panic and action is just one sentence, one that allows no excuses.

Alva stayed by the heart tree, and now Tilo heard what she meant: The humming was different. Not just a pulse. It was... a response. As if the tree were reacting to something climbing up inside it.

"They are moving," Alva whispered.

"Fenna?" Tilo whispered.

Alva nodded. "And they are not alone. The soot is pressing on. It wants to follow."

Klirr turned to her. "Can you close the door? If it's urgent—"

Alva shook her head. "If I close them, I'll cut them off."

Klirr cursed softly. A short, very controlled word, presumably from a very old stockpile.

"Then we'll hold everything up here," said Klirr.

"Everything?" asked Tilo, his voice small.

Klirr looked at him. "Everything we can do."

That wasn't reassuring. But it was honest. And honesty was rare enough that night to almost feel like hope.

Then the heart-shaped tree suddenly vibrated more intensely. A faster pulse. Two beats. Three. And from the door seam came a wafer-thin draft of air, cold and clear, which momentarily wiped away the taste of soot. As if someone downstairs had pushed open a door and briefly let in some fresh air.

Tilo's eyes widened. "That's... a sign, isn't it?"

Alva didn't smile. But her eyes softened. "Yes," she whispered. "They've made it further."

Klirr nodded, as if she had been waiting for just that. "Then we'll hold," she said. "We'll hold until they're back up there, or until the sky makes the decision for us."

And as if the heavens were offended by this phrase, a somewhat larger piece of frosted glass broke off—not large enough to kill anyone, but large enough to show everyone that "something" can very quickly become "too much." It fell, struck the snow, and shattered with a bright, sharp sound.

Silence followed.

This silence was not peaceful. It was the inhalation before the next rupture.

Klirr raised his head and said softly, almost like a prayer, only without religion: "Keep the yard clear. Keep heads clear. Keep the fire small."

Alva tightened her hand on the sack. Tilo stood beside her, his knees weak, but not giving up. And above them, the dome stretched like a thin promise, in the process of renegotiating its terms.

Somewhere deep below them, Fenna and the others were fighting for the beat.

And up here, the task suddenly became very simple and terrible:

Do not burn.

Do not break.

And don't believe the soot when it whispers to you that you are right.

## The crack in the dome

The shard of frosted glass, which had just moments before lain so innocently in the snow, hadn't been large. One could have mistaken it for the forgotten fragment of an overzealous ice sculpture. The problem with frosted glass, however, is that it's only decorative if it stays where it belongs.

This splinter had fallen.

And everything that falls has an opinion about gravity.

Klirr was positioned so that she could see the northeast girder without standing directly beneath it, which on this night was already considered a sophisticated form of intelligence. Above her, the dome stretched like a sky made of glass, and the crack in it was no longer a sudden break, no longer a dramatic "Now everything is broken," but something far more repugnant: a development. A thought that continues. A sentence that writes itself, finding more and more words in the process.

The glass creaked again. Not a loud crash. Just that long, drawn-out sound, as if the dome weren't grinding its teeth together, but rather against the patience of the universe.

"Tighten the supports," Klirr said. She didn't say it as a request. She said it as a law of nature.

Guards and elves moved about. Not all of them quickly, but with purpose. On one side, ropes anchored to sturdy points were being tightened. On the other, struts were being erected that looked as if they had only decided five minutes ago to become part of an architectural structure. It was improvised, but the North Pole was very good at making things out of improvised materials that lasted surprisingly long. This was practically the definition of a "workshop."

Tilo stood beside Alva, one hand on the sack containing the old song, the other on the trunk, as if reminding the heart tree that it was not alone. Tilo looked up, his eyes following the crack, as if he could mend it with his gaze.

"I didn't know glass could be so...resentful," he whispered.

"Glass is honest," said Alva. "It only shows you where you have pushed it too far for too long."

"I feel personally addressed," Tilo murmured.

Another frost chip fell. This time smaller, more like a twitch. It landed somewhere in the yard and made that bright "tck" sound that seemed far too friendly for what it meant.

Klirr raised his hand. "Keep the yard clear! Nobody stands below the fall line! And if you think you're not below the fall line, you're still below the fall line!"

An elf raised his hand. "Where is the fall line?"

Klirr looked at him. "Above you."

That wasn't helpful, but it moved him.

Meanwhile, the soot in the air attempted to create a completely different kind of order. It didn't creep in as a visible cloud, but as a feeling. It turned every small question into an accusation. Every uncertainty into an indictment. And every "We must" into a "Why aren't the others doing it?"



Tilo sensed it because today Tilo felt what he usually preferred to talk away. He tasted it on his tongue like bitter cocoa.

"If the glass cracks," he whispered, "then..."

"Then it falls," Alva said calmly.

"I meant more... metaphysical."

"Metaphysics is a luxury when something wants to fall on your head," said Alva.

Klirr approached them without taking her eyes off the dome. "The crack is moving," she said.

"Of course," Tilo murmured. "He's going for a walk."

"He follows a pattern," Alva said.

Klirr turned his head. "What kind?"

Alva closed her eyes briefly, as if listening to the hum of the heart tree. "It follows the train," she said softly. "Not the wind. Not the frost. It follows... tension from below."

Klirr narrowed his eyes. "From below."

"Yes," said Alva. "The tree holds footsteps. It holds the bridge. And the soot pushes upwards. The crack is... the dome trying to have its say."

Tilo looked back and forth between the tree and the sky. "That's a really bad kind of conversation."

An elf ran up, one of the dome builders, his face pale with cold and a sense of responsibility. In his hand he held a long staff with a small metal head that looked like an ear on a stick.

"Clang!" he gasped. "We're hearing a second line of tension. Not just there. Also back there, above the western arc."

Klirr cursed softly, this time without any prey and with feeling. "Show me."

The craftsman raised his staff and held it against a support beam. He didn't knock. He listened. This was the kind of work you only do when you have a very intimate relationship with things that can kill you.

"There," he said. "Do you hear that?"

Klirr listened, and her face became even calmer, which for Klirr meant: very bad.

Tilo automatically held his breath, even though he didn't know why. Perhaps because the world is sometimes better when you don't supply it with extra oxygen.

"The glass sings," said the craftsman. "But it's wrong."

“Like a choir with a toothache,” Tilo muttered.

The craftsman stared at him briefly, as if wondering whether he hated the sentence or whether he had just explained his life to him. Then he nodded reluctantly. “Yes. Exactly.”

Klirr stood upright. “How do we stabilize it?”

The craftsman hesitated. “We need... warmth at the edges. Just a little. So the frost doesn’t eat away at it any further. And we need a counter-rhythm so the tension is distributed.”

“Heat,” Klirr repeated. “The fire has only just been contained. And the soot is threatening to make everything too hot.”

“Not fire heat,” the craftsman said quickly. “Not wild. Calm. Even. Like—”

He paused, realizing he was about to say something that sounded dangerous that night.

“Like a heart,” Alva finished the sentence for him.

Klirr looked at Alva. “You want us to...”

“Not the tree,” said Alva. “Not directly. It’s already working. But we can do what the song just taught us.”

Tilo blinked. “That you can build snow with a song?”

Alva looked at him. “That form is stronger than panic.”

Klirr understood. Klirr usually understood things when they were said in the language of work. She turned to the guards. “Get the glass rings.”

A guard frowned. “The what?”

“The glass rings,” Klirr repeated, as if it were a matter of course, only briefly interrupted by stupidity. “The small tension rings. The ones you use when repairing lamppost domes.”

The guard ran off.

Tilo leaned towards Alva. “We have small rings to repair large domes?”

“We have small things for big problems,” Alva said. “That’s all we have.”

The soot in the air thickened, as if it had overheard the plan. At the edge of the courtyard, someone began to grumble again, quietly at first, then louder. An elf holding the ropes growled that the others were too slow. Another growled back that he only growled because he felt important.

Klirr didn't even turn around. She simply said: “Those who growl are counting the rope tension out loud. Those who can't count, don't growl.”

That was surprisingly effective.

The craftsman placed the listening device on another support. "It's pulling," he murmured. "It's pulling at the junctions."

Alva glanced briefly at the door's seam in the tree, as if peering through wood into the depths below. "That's Malrik's way," she said. "He makes knives out of knots."

"And we make stops out of knots," said Klirr.

A guard returned with a box. Inside were metal rings, slightly larger than bracelets, with small clips and tiny screw mechanisms. Workshop magic: things so unspectacular that you trust them.

"To the edges of the beams," Klirr ordered. "Not on the crack. Around the crack. We're not catching the fracture, we're catching the tension."

The craftsman nodded immediately and began distributing the rings. Guards climbed the scaffolding, placed the rings on the joints, and tightened them. It wasn't a pretty sight. It was a sight that said: We won't give up, even if we have to improvise.

Tilo watched as one of the rings was put on, and at that moment he heard it: a soft, pleasant clink, as if metal had briefly exhaled in relief. The glass above it still creaked, but... differently. Less hungrily.

"It's... calming down," Tilo whispered.

"A little bit," said Alva.

Klirr raised his head. The crack was still there. It remained. But its growth seemed as if someone had briefly taken away its pleasure. As if it had realized it wasn't alone.

Then the heart tree vibrated.

Not loud. But definitely there. A quick bang, like someone knocking on a door downstairs.

Alva froze. Her hand on her scrotum tightened. "They're deeper," she whispered.

Tilo swallowed. "And the soot?"

"He's calling after me," said Alva.

Klirr looked at the crack, then at the tree. "Then we'll hold on at the top until they cut the cable at the bottom."

"And what if they don't succeed?" Tilo asked, the question coming out before he could stop it.

Klirr looked at him. Her gaze wasn't cruel. Just honest. "Then," she said, "we'll learn very quickly how loud glass can be."

Another frost shard fell. Smaller this time. Almost as a sign that the dome was listening and hadn't yet decided to scream.

Tilo exhaled. "Then... we'll stop," he said, more to himself.

"Yes," said Alva. "We're holding on."

And somewhere deep beneath their feet, in the stone, in the shaft, in the darkness, another rhythm was beating – the one Fenna had brought with her. A beat that didn't scream, didn't burn, didn't want to be right.

A beat that carries.

If glass sounds "calmed," it's roughly equivalent to an angry dog growling "more quietly." It's not peace. It's just a different volume of danger.

The tension rings were now in place at several support points, small metal halos around the spots where the dome was most prone to self-reflection. The guards tightened screws, the craftsman listened, nodded, made adjustments, listened again. He worked with the expression of someone who knows he is calming a huge thing that cannot be calmed by showing fear.

And that was precisely Malrik's second trick: not in the glass, but in the person.

The soot in the air was now so finely dispersed that it was barely perceptible as a smell. It was more a feeling of a kind of thought that suddenly felt more natural than one's own. An irritation that said: This is all ridiculous. Why do I have to do this? Why isn't anyone else doing it? Why am I the one standing in the slush while someone... someone... somewhere... is doing something important?

The "someone" was dangerous. "Someone" is the beginning of scapegoating.

Tilo noticed a tingling sensation in his head as the next elf on the scaffolding hissed: "If that thing up there breaks, we're all dead, and those down there—"

"—are probably doing something heroic right now," Tilo interrupted him, too quickly, too sharply.

He immediately felt the soot react to that sentence. Not because the sentence was wrong, but because it carried that delicious feeling: I am right. I know better. I can correct him now.

Tilo hated how good being right could feel.

Alva turned her head towards him, just slightly. Her gaze wasn't one of reproach. It was a memory.

Tilo swallowed the next word and did what Alva had taught him without saying it directly: He breathed. Once deeply. Then again. And as he did so, the small bell that Fenna had once given him, as if she had sensed that Tilo would one day need a sound that didn't come from his own head, jingled very softly in his pocket.

The tiny ringing was barely audible. But in Tilo's chest, it felt like a nail to hold onto.

Klirr noticed it anyway. Klirr noticed everything that could be useful, and she was the only person who also noticed the useless things, only to forbid them later.

"Bell," she said curtly, without turning around.

"Uh," said Tilo.

"Good," said Klirr. "If you realize you're about to eat each other alive, ring the bell. A ring is better than a scream."

The elf on the scaffold shouted: "We still need a ring on the western arch!"

The craftsman raised his listening stick, listened, and cursed softly. "Yes," he said, "there's still a draft. Not much, but... enough."

Klirr pointed west. "Ring there. And don't pull it too hard. If you pull too hard, you'll make an opinion out of glass."

"Glass has no opinion," someone shouted back.

Klirr looked up, then back at the person. "It has a very clear opinion about whether it wants to lie on the ground."

That ended the discussion.

Alva remained by the heart tree, her hand on the sack, as if simultaneously taking its pulse and settling a dispute without words. The tree hummed in a rhythm that wasn't entirely regular, but genuine. And each time it hummed, the tension rings seemed to feel briefly lighter, as if the metal were saying: Ah. That's the rhythm that belongs here.

Then the trunk vibrated again, more strongly than before.

Not just one blow.

Two.

Three.

One right after the other, like a heart that isn't panicking, but shouting: There's something there.

Alva lifted her head. Her eyes were suddenly very alert.

"They're at a crossroads," she whispered.

Tilo stepped closer. "Fenna?"

Alva nodded, but she didn't look down; she looked right through it. As if she knew the path of the roots like other people know their hallway.

Klirr came to her immediately. "What's happening?"

Alva listened. "The beat below is being disrupted."

"The soot?" Tilo asked.

Alva nodded. "He's pushing harder. He wants to come with me onto the bridge."

Klirr pressed his lips together. "Can he?"

"Not if we keep a clean beat up top," Alva said. "If things falter up top, they falter down below. Then heart snow becomes... just snow."

Tilo turned pale. "And snow is..."

"...he gets offended if you expect too much from him," said Klirr.

The craftsman shouted from the scaffolding: "The crack is changing the color!"

Everyone looked up, even though they shouldn't have. The crack was still there, but in one spot, near a support edge, it glowed very faintly. Not warm. More like... milky. As if something were collecting inside the glass.

"That's frost blight," the craftsman muttered. "If it keeps growing, it'll become brittle. Then one small blow will be enough, and—"

He made a gesture with his hand that means in every language: Then it's over.

Klirr snorted. "Then it won't get a shock."

"The work itself is the blow," the craftsman said quietly. "When there's a pull below, a push above, and on top of that, heat—"

"No heat," Klirr cut him off.

"Not the heat of fire," he said immediately. "I mean... the wrong kind. The uneven kind."

Klirr understood, and that was dangerous because Klirr then acted immediately.

"All lanterns on the northeast support beam must be aligned," she ordered.

An elf called back: "The lamppost control is out of tune!"

Klirr slowly turned around. "Then it's correct," she said, as if that were like "then warm the tea."

"How?" stammered the elf.

Klirr looked at Alva.

Alva sighed almost inaudibly. "With the song," she said.

Tilo raised both hands. "Wait a minute. We're now using an ancient song to... synchronize the lanterns so the dome doesn't break, while down below people are tinkering with a spring that's probably... evil?"

Alva looked at him. "Yes."

Tilo swallowed. "I miss the times when my biggest problem was that someone stole my gloves."

"Your gloves were stolen back then too, because someone needed them," Klirr said. "Now someone needs your nerves."

Tilo wanted to object, but realized he didn't have the nerve for it.

Klirr sent runners forth. Elves ran to the rows of lanterns on the supports, checked, adjusted, and turned. The craftsman signaled, listened, nodded, and corrected. And Alva began to murmur, this time a little louder, not enough for a melody, but enough for the rhythm to fill the courtyard like slow breathing.

Tilo felt the soot in his head trying to fight against it. He whispered: This is ridiculous. This is too late. This isn't your job. Just drop it. You're right, you're overwhelmed.

Tilo rang the bell a second time, quietly, and said something very unheroic but very useful in his head: Shut up.

The bell's tone was small. But soot didn't like clear tones. It liked muffled ones.

There was another creaking sound in the dome, but this time it sounded... more even. Less like a growing crack, more like glass complaining because it's being forced to snap back into place.

"It's holding," murmured the craftsman, almost surprised.

Klirr nodded curtly. "It holds because we hold it."

Alva kept the beat, and the heart tree hummed along. The glow on the trunk briefly intensified, as if it were pleased that it wasn't singing alone.

Then the next impulse came from the tree.

A quick, nervous blow.

And this time something happened that everyone in the courtyard felt even before anyone said it: The heart-shaped snow at the door seam flickered.

Not visible, like light. More like a form that briefly becomes uncertain.

Alva's eyes widened. "They're at the edge," she whispered. "The soot is trying to... smear the bridge."

Klirr immediately drew in air. "Then we'll hold it here twice."

"And what if that's not enough?" Tilo whispered.

Klirr looked at him. Her gaze was hard, but not cold. "Then," she said, "we'll make it as difficult as possible for the soot to use us. That's all we can do."

And as she said this, they heard a faint, clear sound high above: not a splinter falling – more of a clang, as if a tension ring had just caught something and said: No.

For a moment, the crack seemed to stop.

Do not approach.

Don't disappear.

Just wait.

And in this waiting silence, beneath the buzzing heart tree, beneath the taut ropes, beneath the frosted glass sky, the Polarhof held its breath – not out of fear, but out of concentration.

Because somewhere down there, in the depths, everything depended on a rhythm that would not break.

Silence can have two faces.

Sometimes she's what remains when the danger is gone. And sometimes she's what danger does when it decides to be polite before it bites you.

In the Polarhof, silence had become the second type of silence.

The fire was contained, but not forgotten. Heat still smoldered beneath the tarpaulins, like a sulky cat pretending to sleep but ready to spring up at any moment if you looked at it the wrong way. The lanterns on the supports now ran more steadily, their light pulsing in a rhythm that wasn't perfect, but stable enough to soothe the worst of the panic in the glass above.

And the crack... that waited.

He didn't grow visibly. He didn't crack any louder. He held back, as if he'd noticed everyone was looking, and as if he were a child who's very good at only behaving when there are visitors.

Klirr still stood like a fixed point in the courtyard. Guards worked. Elves breathed. Some no longer looked up, having realized that the sky is not impressed by glances. Others looked anyway, because that's just how humans are: we want to see the impact coming, even if it's faster.

Tilo no longer rang the small bell. He simply held it in his pocket, as if its weight alone were a promise. His hands trembled less. Not because he was no longer afraid, but because he had learned that fear has less power when you don't constantly comment on it.

Alva continued murmuring. The sack containing the old song vibrated gently, and the heart tree hummed along, like a choir accompanying itself. The door seam in the trunk glittered



faintly. The heart snow there looked stable—at least as stable as something can look that shouldn't really exist.

Then came the blow.

Not at the top.

Below.

The heart tree vibrated, hard and fast, as if someone inside it had run into a wall.

Alva gasped sharply. Tilo felt his stomach briefly buckle.

“That was...”, he began.

“You’ve reached the point,” Alva said immediately.

Klirr turned to her. "What exactly does that mean?"

Alva's gaze was turned inwards, as if she were listening through roots and stone with one hand on the trunk. "They say they've found something that's resisting," she said softly.

"The soot?" Tilo asked.

“Perhaps,” said Alva. “Or something that feeds the soot. Something... old.”

Klirr pressed his lips together. "And up top?"

As if the word "above" had offended the heavens, a soft crackling sound came from the dome. No splinter fell, but the crack changed again. In one spot, near the western arch, a frost bloom appeared, a milky patch in the glass that looked like a small cloud that had decided to make its home in a crack.

The craftsman immediately raised his listening stick and listened. His face turned gray. "That's not good," he whispered.

"That's my favorite sentence," Tilo said dryly.

The craftsman ignored him. “The tension is shifting. It’s seeking new paths. If it takes the western arc, it won’t just tear up there. It will tear... all the way around.”

“Like a bowl breaking,” Tilo murmured.

“Like a sky coming down,” Klirr corrected.

She raised her hand. "More rings. And put them on faster."

The craftsman hesitated. "Too many rings make it stiff. If it gets too stiff, it will break somewhere else."

Klirr looked at him. "So?"

He swallowed. "So we need the rhythm. The real one. Synchronization is good, but..."

He looked at the heart tree. "...the heart must lead."

Alva continued murmuring, and this time everyone sensed it: the rhythm became somewhat clearer, as if she had decided that secrecy was over. No melody could be heard, but the pattern was. Long. Short. Long. Pause. Long. It was the beat of an old song, one that didn't seek to please, but to endure.

And indeed: some elves suddenly began breathing in the same rhythm. Unconsciously. For a moment, the courtyard became a large chest.

The soot in the air trembled. You could sense how it was trying to infiltrate this order, to distort it. It whispered: This is absurd. This is too late. You are right to give up.

And then something strange happened: An elf who had previously been grumbling suddenly began to hum softly as well. Not intentionally. Not beautifully. Just... along with it. The soot had less room to settle.

"They're doing it," Tilo whispered.

Klirr glanced at him briefly. "Who?"

Tilo swallowed. "Everyone."

Klirr nodded, as if she had expected it. Then, surprisingly gently: "Good. Then the work is no longer just a machine. Then it is a body. And a body can defend itself."

The craftsman added another ring and tightened it. The glass creaked, but it sounded less like "I'm breaking" and more like "I'm annoyed that I have to work."

Then a sound came from the heart tree that triggered a fenna alarm in Alva's eyes: a deeper undertone in the humming. A sound that didn't belong to the song. A cold scraping, as if something were scratching at the roots.

Alva froze. "The soot... finds the door," she whispered.

Tilo turned pale. "Can he... get out?"

Alva shook her head, but not confidently enough. "Not as a thing," she said. "As a feeling. As a thought. As... a right."

And as if to confirm this, someone suddenly began to shout at the edge of the courtyard. Not because of fire. Not because of glass. Because of another elf who was supposedly in his way. It was a ridiculous argument, but it had suddenly become huge. The soot had inflated him, like you inflate a balloon until it bursts.

Klirr reacted immediately. She didn't go in like a brawl mediator. She went in like a mechanic who finds a squeaky gear.

"Stop," she said.

The screaming elf stared at her. "He has—"

"Stop," Klirr repeated, and this time it sounded as if the word had an edge.

The eleven took a breath to protest.

Klirr held something out to him.

A clamping ring.

The elf blinked. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Turn it," said Klirr. "Tighten it. Over there. You want to get rid of energy? Good. Give it to the dome. Not to your colleague."

The elf stood there, bewildered, then took the ring as if the clanging had just given him the only way to avoid looking ridiculous. He left, cursing, but working.

Tilo stared at Klirr. "You redirected him..."

Klirr didn't look at him. "Anger is energy. Malrik wants it. I give it to the glass."

Alva continued murmuring, and the humming of the heart tree became clearer again. The cold undertone remained, but it grew quieter, as if the tree had decided to ignore it.

Then the trunk vibrated again – this time not in a panic, but rhythmically. Three quick beats, then a pause. As if someone below was giving a signal that wasn't born of fear.

Alva's eyes widened. "That's Fenna," she whispered.

"What does that mean?" asked Tilo.

Alva smiled for the first time tonight, a tiny smile, and it wasn't a happy one. It was defiant. "They say she's changed something," she said quietly.

And as if the heavens had heard this message, something happened above that everyone saw at once: The milky frost patch on the western arc did not get any bigger.

He stayed.

It stopped growing, as if someone had briefly reminded the frost that it wasn't in charge here.

The craftsman listened, stared, listened again. Then he looked down at Klirr, and there was something like astonishment in his gaze. "The tension... is dissipating," he said.

Klirr nodded once, slowly. "Good."

Tilo felt his heart skip a beat, then start beating again. "Does that mean... we'll make it?"

Klirr looked at him. "Does that mean," she said, "that we're not dead yet? That's enough for today."

Alva held the sack, murmured, and the heart tree hummed like a heart that refuses to give up. The farmyard worked. The fire glowed, but it no longer jumped. The glass creaked, but it didn't scream. The soot whispered, but it was drowned out by something it disliked: a shared rhythm.

And somewhere deep down, in the stone, where the wrong rhythm hummed backwards, Fenna and the others continued to fight.

The crack in the dome was still waiting.

But he was no longer waiting alone.

## Delivery without magic

The North Pole has many traditions.

Some of them are old, venerable, and so firmly embedded in the snow that you'll never get them out again. Others are more... practical ideas that someone had at some point when they realized that while "magic" is a wonderful concept, it's a lousy substitute for Plan B when magic is offended.

Klirr never called Plan B Plan B.

Klirr called him "doing".

She stood in the Polar Courtyard, which smelled of damp felt and burnt wood, and stared up at the dome, as if she could explain to the glass with a mere glance that it wasn't the main attraction today. The crack glittered; it waited, it pretended to have time. And that was precisely why it was dangerous, because things that have time begin to take themselves too seriously.

Beneath her, the work was in motion. Not frantically as before. More like a body that has learned that panic may be fast, but it doesn't sustain.

Alva continued murmuring the old song, and the heart tree hummed in a rhythm that thinned the soot in the air. Not away. Just thinned, as if someone had diluted the bad mood with water until it at least didn't taste so concentrated anymore.

Tilo stood next to Alva, the small bell in his pocket, his fingers curled around it like a lifebuoy.

"If the glass doesn't break," he said quietly, "then that's probably the best we can expect today."

"You don't expect anything," said Klirr, without looking up. "You work."

A messenger ran into the courtyard, almost tripping over a snowdrift, and caught himself at the last moment because even stumbling seemed dangerous today. He was out of breath, with that look on his face that people get when they're delivering news nobody wants.

Klirr turned to him. "Speak."

The messenger swallowed. "Workshop center. Sled area. The... the magic conduits—"

"Slowly," said Klirr.

"—they don't pull evenly," he managed to say. "The sled core is warm, but the leads are... thin. And the leading edges on the runners are fluttering. Marei said that's... uh... 'not stable enough for clean lift'."

Tilo raised his hand as if he were sitting in class. "That means...?"

The messenger looked at him as if Tilo had just asked whether snow gets wet. "That means," he said, "when we take off, the sled might not... fly properly."

Klirr nodded once. "Good."

Tilo stared at her. "How can that be good?"

"Because it's information," Klirr said. "Information is better than hope."

Alva briefly raised her head. "Fenna is down," she said quietly, as if she needed to remind everyone. "And she's doing something that buys us time. But time is... not a gift. Time is credit."

The messenger nodded frantically, because everyone at the North Pole knows what it's like to have credit: It feels good until you see the bill.

"How long?" asked Klirr.

The messenger shrugged, as if to say: I'm an elf, not an oracle. "Nobody knows. But the phone lines are busy."

Tilo whispered: "Can wires be nervous?"

"Anything can be nervous," Alva said. "If it's wired with enough hope."

Klirr glanced up at the dome once more. The frost patch on the west arch held. The crack wasn't visibly growing. It was the best they could get.

Then she turned around and said the sentence that, in a work that has relied on magic for centuries, sounds roughly like "We're going for a swim now, but please without water":

"Prepares for delivery without magic."

Silence fell.

Not the dangerous silence from before. A different kind of silence. The silence that arises when many minds simultaneously try to swallow a thought that is too big.

Finally, an elf said, very small: "But... that's not possible."

Klirr looked at him. "Yes."

"But... how?"

Klirr pointed at the courtyard, at the people, at the guards, at the hands that had just been pressing down snow until Feuer felt ashamed. "Like this," she said. "With everything we have. And with less than we want."

Tilo felt the soot instantly settling in his head: This is madness. This is impossible. You're right to be afraid. Say it.

He rang the bell softly in his pocket. Just a tiny clink. And said to himself again: Shut up.

Alva nodded slowly. "There are old paths," she said softly. "Before the sled, before the flight, before the glamour. Paths of wood and sore muscles."

Tilo blinked. "We deliver... on foot?"

"On foot," said Klirr.

"That's... a lot of foot," said Tilo.

Klirr gave him a look that was both reproving and comforting. "Then move yours," she said.

"I-"

"You," said Klirr.

Tilo opened his mouth, then closed it again. It was astonishing how quickly one could develop into someone in a disaster zone who was given tasks without being asked.

Klirr summoned two guards. "Secure the sledding yard. No sparks on the lines. Have snow flour ready. And send runners to the gift hall: sort the sacks into boxes. Heavy items at the bottom. Light items at the top. If we can't fly, we can't carry everything like it's air."

The guards nodded and ran. Orders became movement, movement became work. The factory liked that. You could feel how the soot found less surface area to attack when hands were doing something that didn't shout.

Tilo followed Alva and Klirr toward the gift hall, and as they walked, he heard someone behind them begin to hum softly. Not the old song. Something new. A worker's song. A rhythm that says: I'm tired, but I'm here.

The gift hall was warm, not comfortably warm, but intensely warm. Thousands of packages, boxes, sacks – a sea of paper, ribbon, wood, and anticipation. Normally, a feeling of excitement hung over this hall, like a soft crackling.

Today the atmosphere was different.

Today the atmosphere crackled with tension, like "if this burns down, we're all done for".

Klirr stopped at the entrance and raised her hand. Not high, but clearly. "Listen," she said.

The hall grew quieter. Not silent, but quieter. Heads turned. Eyes searched for something to hold onto.

"Magic is damaged," said Klirr. "This isn't a question of blame. It's a condition. And conditions are there to be addressed."

An elf hesitantly raised his hand. "And... the route? We'll find it without magic—"

"We'll find it," said Klirr. "With maps. With stars. With a compass. With experience. And with a very strong will not to complain."

Tilo whispered: "That's your magic spell, isn't it?"

Klirr ignored him and continued: "We're repacking. Boxes instead of sacks. Carrying harnesses instead of conveyor belts. Whoever can walk, walks. Whoever can't walk still carries, just more slowly. Whoever claims they can't carry helps with sorting until they remember they can."

A few elves laughed nervously. Nervous laughter was a kind of medicine today. Not strong, but better than soot.

Alva stepped beside Klirr and briefly placed her hand on a stack of packages. "There are gifts that need magic," she said softly. "Not because they need to fly, but because they... need light. Some things only arrive when they are allowed to believe."

Tilo swallowed. "And what if they don't get it?"

Alva looked at him, and there was something in her gaze that Tilo didn't like because it was true. "They'll still arrive," she said. "Just differently. And sometimes 'different' is better than 'not at all'."

Klirr nodded. "Enough philosophy. Boxes!"

Elves began to pack. Straps were loosened, sacks cut open, packages rearranged. Large wooden crates were hauled in. Leather carrying straps. Sled runners for the ground. Small sleds, normally used only for camp work, suddenly took on the aura of heroes.

Tilo helped because he had no other choice, and because it's incredibly reassuring to be able to do something in a crisis that is unambiguous: package in box. Box closed. Next box.

He noticed how the soot in his head lessened. Not disappeared completely. But it became quieter. Soot doesn't like routine, unless routine is bitter.

Klirr moved through the rows, correcting, pointing, pushing, without anyone noticing how she was doing it all at once. And again and again she glanced towards the door, as if expecting someone to burst in and say: Good news! Everything's magical again!

Instead, another messenger arrived. This time even paler.

"Clatter," he gasped. "Sleigh stable. The reindeer are restless. And... without the ruby, it's... worse."

The name hit the hall like a stone into water. Rubin Rednose wasn't just a reindeer. Rubin was the red nose in a system that took darkness very seriously.

Klirr briefly closed her eyes. "Of course," she said.

Tilo raised his head. "Oh. That's right. Rubin is still gone."

Alva murmured: "Everything is connected."

Klirr opened her eyes again. "Then," she said calmly, "'without magic' is not just a plan from now on. It's a direction."

She turned to the elves. "Pack the crates. Make them portable. Make them fast. If we can't fly, we'll deliver what we can. If we can't deliver everything, we'll deliver smartly. And if you think that sounds unfair—"

The soot in the air stirred, eagerly.

Klirr didn't smile. But her voice became even clearer. "—then you're right," she said. "And tonight, 'being right' is completely useless. So work."

And the factory was working.

Above them, glass creaked somewhere.

The heart tree hummed beneath them.

And somewhere far below, Fenna fought against a rhythm that would have preferred the world to be silent.

It turned out that "without magic" didn't mean that everything suddenly became boring.

It simply meant that the problems had to start behaving creatively.

In the gift hall, creativity sounded like this: wood creaking, ropes squeaking, boxes clattering, and somewhere someone trying to lift a sack that had clearly decided to be a small black hole.

"The sack has grown," gasped an elf whose face already had the color of "I regret decisions".

"Bags don't gain weight," his colleague growled, pulling on the other end. "You've just gotten weaker."



"I am not weaker!"

"Then the jerk will be offended," she said, as if that were the logical alternative.

Tilo was carrying a crate that was surprisingly heavy for its size. It was the kind of heavy that required not only muscle power but also an inner agreement with gravity. He felt as if his arms were inventing new noises just to complain. Beside him, an elf was carrying two crates with the same expression other people have when carrying a napkin.

"How do you do that?" gasped Tilo.

The elf blinked. "I'll lift them."

"Yes, but... how?"

"With your hands."

Tilo wasn't sure whether he was being insulted or taught.

Klirr moved between the rows, tapping on a box here, pulling on a strap there, as if she were some kind of angry conductor. Wherever she passed, things suddenly made sense. Not beautiful. Not cozy. But sensible.

"This crate is stacked too high," she said, pushing a stack down before it could fall on its own. "If it tips over, it'll break. If it breaks, someone will break. If someone breaks, we won't have time for dramatic noises."

"But—" began an elf.

"No buts," said Klirr. "But is a word that only exists because people don't like to say yes right away."

Alva stood at the edge of the hall, not because she didn't want to help, but because she was holding something else: the beat. The heart tree was outside, but its humming was like a second heart in the factory, palpable in the floorboards. And Alva's murmuring, that old song that needed no melody, seemed to spread through the beams. You could tell because people were grumbling less. Not because they were suddenly cheerful, but because their thoughts weren't so sticky anymore.

"I have a question," said Tilo, as he put down his box and immediately realized that he would never be able to fully close his hands again.

"Then ask them later," said Klirr.

"It's a small question," Tilo said hastily, because he had learned that in crises, "small" is often the only currency accepted. "If we deliver without magic... how do we even do that? The North Pole is... big. The world is... bigger. And I..." He gestured to his arms. "...am more of a suggestion than a solution."

Klirr looked at him as if she were briefly considering tying him to a box to stop him from talking. Then she said, "We don't deliver everything."

Tilo blinked. "But..."

Klirr raised a hand. "No buts."

Alva stepped closer, her eyes calm. "Sometimes," she said softly, "the gift isn't the thing. Sometimes the gift is that someone even tried."

"That sounds beautiful," said Tilo. "And terrible."

"Beautiful and terrible are often related," said Alva.

Another runner came in, out of breath, his cap askew. "Clatter! The reindeer..."

"What is it this time?" Klirr asked, without turning around.

The runner swallowed. "They're pawing the ground. They don't like the disturbance. And without Ruby... it's as if the darkness is closer."

Tilo sensed a brief surge of tension in the hall. Rubin Rotnase wasn't just a navigation problem. Rubin was a symbol, and symbols are practical in the factory because you don't have to lift them, yet they're still heavy.

"Fine," said Klirr. "Then it will stay dark. We'll work anyway."

"The animals can't simply be convinced," stammered the runner.

"Yes," said Klirr. "With calm. And with hay. And if that doesn't help, with someone who doesn't tell them to calm down."

Tilo looked around. "Who would that be?"

Klirr looked at him. "You."

Tilo got the feeling that his life was a conversation in which he had never learned when it was okay to say "no".

"I don't know anything about reindeer," he managed to say.

"Neither do you," said Klirr. "So you have something in common."

Before Tilo could come up with a new excuse, the large door to the hall opened.

Not dramatic. Not with a bang. More like the door had decided that something important was about to happen and therefore needed to be briefly... respectful.

Santa Claus entered.

If you think Santa Claus always arrives with bells and a laughing "Ho ho ho," then you've never seen him when things go wrong. In those moments, he wasn't any less himself—he was more... focused. As if someone had turned his sparkle inward.

His coat smelled of cold air and pine needles, and of a very old fireplace that had seen many winters. His gaze swept across the hall, and wherever he looked, things didn't automatically improve, but they became... clearer. As if reminding the world that, despite everything, it still had a purpose.

He paused briefly, looked at the crates, the straps, the improvised sleds.

"So, plan B," he said calmly.

Klirr approached him. "Plan B," she confirmed.

Santa Claus nodded once, as if "Plan B" were an old friend you don't like but who is always on time. Then he looked at Alva.

"You hold the song," he said.

Alva nodded. "As best I can."

"Good," he said. "Then we'll side with you."

Tilo noticed his throat suddenly went dry. Not from fear. More from the feeling that he was witnessing something he wouldn't be able to properly explain later without people laughing.

Santa Claus walked between the rows, placed a hand on a box as if checking its weight. He didn't look sad. He looked... practical.

"How far does the magic reach?" he asked.

An elf, who otherwise probably preferred to disappear into shelves, cleared his throat. "The lines... are flickering. The core is warm, but the buoyancy isn't stable. It might be enough for short jumps. Or... for nothing at all."

Santa Claus nodded. "Then we'll use what's safe. No jumps that would send the boxes flying into the clouds."

"We could catapult them," someone murmured, half-jokingly, half-seriously. That was the problem with disasters: some jokes suddenly become suggestions.

Klirr glanced at the person who said: If you say that again, you'll be catapulted yourself.

Santa Claus remained calm. "We deliver according to proximity," he said. "And according to need. Warm things need warmth. Small things need closeness. Some things... just need to arrive."

Alva nodded, as if he had just said something she had known for years. Klirr said, "I need routes."

Santa Claus raised his head. "Star compass?" he asked.

Marei was not there, but the compass was well-known enough that the hall itself understood the name as a tool.

"Fenna has it," Alva said quietly. And in that sentence lay the whole night: The person with the tool is down in the hole, while the world above is burning.

Santa Claus closed his eyes briefly. One breath. Then he opened them again, his voice calm. "Then we'll take cards," he said. "And we'll take memories."

Tilo hesitantly raised his hand. "I have a memory," he said before he could stop himself.

Everyone was looking at him. That was inconvenient. Getting attention is difficult.

"As a child," Tilo said quickly, "I once saw... a train-drawn sled. Not the big one. A small one. For camps. It went through a tunnel that was... very straight. And it came out somewhere else. It was like a shortcut."

Alva blinked. "The old transport tunnels."

Klirr nodded slowly. "Under the halls. Towards the external storage area."

Santa Claus looked at Tilo. "You remember," he said. Not an acknowledgment. A statement of fact. "Good. Then we'll show you how to use a memory."

Tilo wasn't sure if he wanted that.

Klirr clapped her hands once. Not loudly, but sharply enough to draw a line across the hall. "Listen!" she called out. "We're making convoys. Three trains. One for nearby regions—coasts, islands, anything that can handle snow. One for the northern lines. One will remain in reserve. No solo heroic journeys. Whoever travels alone returns as a legend, and legends are poor bearers."

A few elves laughed briefly. That helped.

Santa Claus approached a row of small sleighs, the kind usually used for boxes. He placed his hand on one of the drawbars. "These sleighs," he said, "used to carry things before they were allowed to fly. You remember."

Tilo blinked. "Can sleds remember?"

Santa Claus looked at him, and there was a small, dry glint in his eyes. "Everything remembers," he said. "Some things only pretend to forget because they are ashamed."

Klirr nodded. "Then let the sleds stop being ashamed. Harness them up. Pack them. Mark out the routes."

Outside, the dome creaked somewhere, as if protesting that inside, hope was being packed into boxes. The soot in the air whispered softly, but the factory answered with wood, with ropes, with footsteps.

And while Tilo found himself testing a sled by the handle, thinking, maybe I can do this, the heart tree outside vibrated briefly, like a signal from the depths.

Alva held the sack tighter.

Santa Claus raised his head.

"They are still here," he said quietly.

And then, without any pathos, without any bells, he said: "Then we will carry them until they are back up."

Convoys sound like order.

In practice, convoys sound like: "Where's the rope?", "Who has the strap?", "Why is this box suddenly twice as heavy?", and "If I step on a candy cane again, I'm quitting and becoming a hermit in a cave that's guaranteed not to burn down."

It was astonishing how quickly a system that had relied on magic for centuries could adapt to the idea that things can also be moved with one's back, hands, and a great deal of stubbornness. Perhaps because, in the end, magic is just an elegant form of work, and work likes to be taken seriously.

In the large entrance hall of the toboggan yard, the small toboggans stood ready. No gleaming runners, no jagged edges, no shimmering harnesses. Just wood, metal, and straps. Things you can touch without them flinching in offense.

The reindeer were still restless.

Not all of them. But enough to be noticed. They pawed the ground, they snorted, they shook their antlers as if trying to shake off something that wasn't on them, but in the air.

"That's the darkness," murmured a stable elf. "Without a ruby... they feel it more intensely."

Tilo stood at the edge, a halter in his hand, and he had the feeling that the halter was looking at him just as questioningly as the reindeer: You? Really you?

Klirr stood behind him and said, without any gentleness: "You're going in there now."

"I," Tilo began.

"You," Klirr confirmed.

Santa Claus stepped beside her, his hands loose, as if this whole night had been a particularly complicated afternoon. "They don't like hectic words," he said to Tilo. "Don't tell them anything you don't believe yourself."

Tilo swallowed. That was a cruel instruction, because Tilo usually believes about fifty things at once, and most of them are contradictions.

He entered the stable area slowly. The hay smelled of summer, which at the North Pole always carries a hint of deception. The animals looked at him. Their eyes were dark and large, and they held that quiet reindeer logic: We do what we do, and you're just a human who overthinks things.

Tilo stopped and breathed. The soot in the air was thinner here, but not gone. He whispered: You have no idea. You'll scare her. You'll make everything worse.

Tilo felt the bell in his pocket, briefly touched it through the fabric, didn't ring it. Just felt it.

Then he said quietly, more to himself than to the animals: "Okay. I... neither do I."

A reindeer blinked.

Tilo took a step closer. He lifted the halter, not like someone trying to control an animal, but like someone asking a question.

"You don't have to," Tilo whispered. "But... if you can... that would be quite helpful."

That wasn't a commanding tone. Not a heroic tone. It was the tone of a person who has no means but honesty.

And surprisingly, it seemed to work.

The reindeer snorted and took a step forward. Not submissively. Testing. It allowed the halter to be slipped on, as if it were a decision it had made itself.

Tilo breathed out as if he had just persuaded a particularly difficult door.

Behind him, Klirr said dryly: "Good. You're useful."

Tilo wanted to be happy about it, but his body was too busy trying not to tremble.

Inside the hall, crates were loaded onto the sleds. Straps were tightened. Elves checked the weights, distributing them wisely: heavy items at the front, so the sled wouldn't jackknife backward; light items on top, so they wouldn't be crushed under the first pothole. It was logistics. And logistics has something reassuringly relentless about it: it doesn't ask if you're afraid. It only asks if you've secured the crate properly.

Santa Claus walked along the rows, checking, nodding, occasionally saying a sentence that was so unspectacular that it worked precisely because of that.

"That's too loose."

"That's good."

"More hay for the animals."

"Don't run."

At "Don't run" he glanced briefly at Tilo, and Tilo had the feeling that he was being reminded by a very old, very calm gaze that haste is also a kind of sabotage.

Alva entered the vestibule, no longer carrying the bag with the old song, but still with the rhythm on her lips. She was pale, not from fear, but from the cost of holding onto a song when the world is pulling at it.

"The tree will hold," she said quietly.

Santa Claus nodded. "And Fenna?"

Alva closed her eyes briefly. "She is... deep," she said. "But she is there. I can feel her rhythm. It is... stubborn."

"Good," said Santa Claus. And it sounded as if "stubborn" were a title of nobility.

Klirr stepped closer. "Routes," she said. "We need routes."

Alva exhaled. "The tunnels," she said. "The old transport tunnels lead outside, to the external depot. From there... we can send the sleds out into the wide lines. Not everywhere. But... enough."

Santa Claus nodded. "Then we'll use the ground while the sky can't behave."

Tilo raised a hand. "I can show you the stollen," he said quickly, before he could change his mind again.

Klirr looked at him. "You're in front," she said. "You know the curves. And if you get lost, please get lost in a direction that won't kill us."

Tilo nodded, as if it were a normal sentence one hears often in life.

The first convoy was ready: three sleds, powered by reindeer, pulled across the ground, not through the air. Crates full of parcels that wouldn't fly today, but slide. It wasn't elegant. But it was possible.

An elf, young and nervous, asked softly: "And... when we're outside? Without magic... will we find the houses? Will we find the paths?"

Santa Claus stopped and looked at him. "We'll find it," he said calmly. "We found it before, too. And tonight is before."

The sentence was so simple that it briefly cleared the air. The soot didn't like that.

Outside, the dome creaked again, as if it had heard the sentence and was protesting against people remembering. A quiet, deep sound. Not immediately disturbing. But present.

Klirr looked towards the courtyard. "If the dome breaks while the convoys are out—"

"Then they're outside," said Santa Claus.

Klirr blinked. "That's... no consolation."

"Yes," he said. "It is a plan."

Klirr hated the fact that it was true.

Tilo stood at the head of the first sled, holding the lead reindeer's rope, feeling its muscle tension like a second language. He had no idea how he'd ended up there, but now he was, and suddenly that was enough.

"Let's go," said Klirr.

It was not a celebratory start. No pomp. Just an order.

The reindeer began to move. The sled runners scraped over wooden planks, then over snow. Crates jerked, straps creaked, and the convoy began to move towards the tunnel entrance.

Santa Claus walked a few steps alongside, briefly placing his hand on the shaft of the first sleigh, like a blessing, but without religion. Then he let go.

"Take them out," he said to Tilo.

Tilo nodded. "I'll... take them out."

"And Tilo," Santa Claus said softly, so that only Tilo could hear, "when you feel the darkness, don't tell the animals they don't feel it. Tell them you feel it too. Then you'll be honest. And honesty is... a lantern."

Tilo swallowed. "Okay."

The convoy rolled into the tunnel. The entrance swallowed them up, like an old tunnel swallows things: no comment.

Back in the hall, Klirr stopped and watched the convoy go by, as if checking whether the world still worked.

Alva stood next to her. "This is risky," she whispered.

Klirr nodded. "Everything is risky."

"And Malrik?" asked Alva.

Klirr looked at the heart-shaped tree outside, at the crack in the dome, at the contained fires. "Malrik wanted us to give up," she said. "Instead, we're delivering. Without magic. That will..."

"Make them angry," Alva muttered.

Klirr nodded. "Good. Angry saboteurs make mistakes."

Alva looked at her. "And what if he doesn't make a mistake?"

Klirr uttered the sentence that was perhaps the most honest magic she possessed: "Then we'll continue."



And while the convoys disappeared into the tunnels, while glass waited above and a false beat hummed backwards below, the factory was suddenly what it had always been: a machine made of people, wood, and defiance.

The delivery began.

No magic required.

But not without willpower.

## Fenna in the ice tunnel

The shaft was so deep that at some point you stop describing it as "deep" and instead start perceiving it as "rude".

Brann climbed first because Brann was the kind of person who could make even a ravine feel like it was to blame for being in the way. The heart-shaped snow rope beneath his hands didn't crunch like ordinary frost. It felt like a promise you could touch, and Fenna wasn't sure if that was comforting or frightening. Promises are treacherous. They always sound good until you realize they come with expectations.

Marei followed with the star compass, which glowed faintly and impatiently in the darkness. Fenna came last, the small bell in her pocket like a personal anchor. She had long since realized: the soot wasn't just in the air; it was in the spaces between thoughts, precisely where one usually stores one's own excuses.

The deeper they descended, the more the world's scent changed. The wood and workshop air remained above. Down here, it smelled of stone and a coldness not made of weather, but of time. It's a different kind of cold. Weather-cold bites your ears. Time-cold settles in your joints and stays until you forgive someone you didn't even know you held a grudge against.

"I hate ladders," Brann growled.

"This is not a ladder," said Marei, her voice muffled by the shaft.

"I hate things where you climb down while feeling the darkness directly beneath you," Brann clarified.

"That's... amazingly specific," Fenna murmured.

"I am a man of clear principles," said Brann, and then his boot stepped on something solid.

There was a ledge at the bottom. The shaft didn't end, but it paused. A narrow ring hewn into the stone, the old structure Fenna had seen the first time, only now it seemed closer. The edge of the ring was covered in heart-shaped snow, as if the tree had reached out a hand and said: Here. Safe. As safe as a shaft can be.

Brann jumped first, landing with a thumping sound that was a bit too loud. The shaft took the sound, reshaped it, and somewhere deeper the humming of the off-beat rhythm answered, as if it had briefly laughed.

Marei landed next to him, much more quietly. Fenna arrived last and felt the soot in the air immediately cling to her as she touched down. Not to her clothes. To her mood.

Down here it was easier to be angry because it felt right. As if the place itself had a story to tell, one that begins with "and then everything was unfair".

"Don't listen," Fenna whispered to herself.

Brann looked at her. "Are you talking to the hole?"

"With me," said Fenna.

"Fine," Brann growled. "If you start arguing with the hole, I'll pull you out."

"I will try to behave myself," Fenna said dryly.

They shone a small lamp into the passage leading away from the ledge. The stone was old and smooth, covered in places with a thin layer of ice. Not friendly ice. More like ice that claimed it had been there before you and would still be there after you, regardless of what you thought.

The old elf with the bell was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps he was standing somewhere in the shadows, doing what shadows like to do: pretending to be uninvolved while listening to everything.

"The path," Marei said, her voice taking on that tone she got when she tried to transform her fear into analysis. "It is... no longer just stone."

Fenna saw what she meant. At one point, the passage was no longer simply damp and cold, but glassy. The stone was covered with a layer of ice, but not chaotically. It was structured, like a thin, clear blanket, beneath which ran patterns. Lines. Circles. Tiny star-shaped dots, as if someone had written a map in the frost.

"That's not natural," Fenna whispered.

"This is a tunnel," said Marei. "An ice tunnel."

Brann snorted. "Underground. Of course."

Fenna raised the star compass. The bright currents in the glass ran across the ice, as if they recognized it. And then Fenna saw something that sent a chill down her spine: the dark current was running across it too. Not just across it. It was in the patterns. As if someone had rubbed soot into the lines.

"He marked the way," Fenna whispered.

"For us?" Brann asked.

“For himself,” said Fenna. “Or for something he wants to awaken.”

Marei crouched down and ran her finger across the ice. She immediately pulled it back, as if she had touched a hot stove. “This is... not just cold.”

“How can cold not just be cold?” asked Brann.

Marei blinked. “It’s... deliberately cold.”

Fenna knew the feeling. It was a coldness that wasn’t just there, but one that was directed at you. As if it were saying: You’re not welcome here. And even worse: You should realize that yourself.

Fenna reached for the bell and rang it once. The sound was small, but it cut through the air like a knife through fog. At the same moment, the dark current in the compass flickered briefly, as if offended that someone dared to show clarity.

“That helps,” whispered Marei.

“It helps me,” said Fenna. “And if it helps me, it helps you. So... stay close.”

Brann stepped cautiously onto the ice. His boot slipped half a centimeter, then caught itself. Brann paused, as if giving the ice time to apologize.

“If I slip here,” he growled, “I’ll blame the ice. Loudly.”

“Don’t do that,” Marei said immediately.

“Why?”

“Because guilt down here is... food,” said Fenna.

Brann grimaced. “Then I’ll blame the ice cream very slightly. Just a little bit. Dietary blame.”

Fenna couldn’t suppress a short laugh, which felt surprisingly good. Laughter was like opening a window. Soot didn’t like windows.

They ventured further into the ice tunnel. The passage widened, and beneath the ice, old tracks appeared: carved grooves, as if sled runners or small cart wheels had once run there. Transport routes. Perhaps the same old tunnels mentioned earlier, only deeper, older, closer to something one would rather forget.

“Things have been accomplished here,” Marei murmured.

“Yes,” said Fenna. “And if Malrik knows this... then he knows how to move things that shouldn’t be moved.”

The humming from the depths was louder here, not necessarily in the ears, but in the gut. It was a backwards rhythm that made you feel like you were hearing a sentence condemning you before you’d even finished thinking it through.

Brann stopped and put his hand on the wall. "I don't like this."

"You don't like anything," said Fenna.

"That's true," Brann growled. "But I specifically don't like this one."

Fenna looked ahead. The ice tunnel curved, and beyond the bend shimmered something that didn't look like natural frost, but rather a clear light trapped in the ice. The lines in the ground pattern became denser, the star points more numerous. The star compass vibrated.

"There's an intersection there," said Marei.

"Or a trap," said Fenna.

"Or both," said Brann.

They reached the point where the tunnel opened. A larger, round chamber with several ice-covered passages leading in different directions. In the center stood something that Fenna initially mistook for a stone, until she got closer and realized: it was a post. An old metal signpost, half-buried in the ice. And symbols were carved into the metal.

Star. Circle. Line.

"The sign," Marei whispered.

"That's not Malrik's mark," Fenna said. "That's... ours. Or at least: the mark of the factory."

Brann leaned forward. "Then this is official," he growled. "The hole now has signs."

Fenna raised the compass. The bright currents flowed toward one of the passages. The dark current flowed into another. And that was the problem: Both paths seemed correct. Both paths seemed necessary.

"He's making it difficult for us," Fenna whispered. "He's giving us two truths."

"Which one is the real one?" asked Marei.

Fenna swallowed. That was exactly the kind of question the soot loved, because it forces you to judge. And judgments are slippery.

Fenna rang the bell again. Once. Clearly. Smalllly.

"The real one is the one that doesn't flatter," Fenna said quietly.

Marei frowned. "What do you mean?"

Fenna stared at the two streams. The dark path felt... tempting. Faster. More direct. Like a shortcut that tells you: If you do this, you're the hero. You're important. You have a right to be angry.

The bright path felt... arduous. Like work. Like patience. Like a path that doesn't reward you, but merely doesn't destroy you.

"We are taking the difficult route," said Fenna.

Brann growled. "Of course."

Marei nodded slowly. "Of course," she repeated, and Fenna saw something loosen in Marei's face, as if she had just understood that "right" sometimes just means: It doesn't feel good.

Fenna stepped into the bright hallway.

The ice tunnel swallowed them up, cold and clear. The buzzing didn't disappear behind them, but it became... a little more offended. As if it had hoped they would choose the easier way out.

And as they went deeper, as the frost crackled beneath their feet like old memories, Fenna felt something telling her: The path does not only lead to the spring.

It also leads to what Malrik has buried within himself.

The arduous path had one advantage: it was honest enough not to sell itself as an advantage.

It was narrower, colder, and the ice beneath it resembled a rigid plan more than a pretty map. The lines were straighter, the star points less frequent, as if the tunnel were saying: There's nothing to admire here. Only to do.

Fenna walked in front because she had made the decision, and decisions have an unpleasant habit: they want to be followed. Marei held the star compass so that it not only shone but also soothed. Brann walked behind and did what he always did when he felt uneasy: he growled softly so the world would know he was still there.

"If I ever build a workshop," Brann murmured, "I'll make it with doors. Lots of doors. And no corridors pretending to be digestive tracts."

"You would get lost in your own doorways," Fenna said.

"I would scream at the doors until they obeyed me," Brann said.

"Doors don't obey," said Marei.

"Everyone obeys if you're loud enough," Brann growled.

"Unfortunately, that's Malrik's philosophy," said Fenna.

Brann then remained silent for a moment, which, coming from Brann, was almost an apology.

The ice tunnel descended. Not steeply, but noticeably, as if it were sliding beneath the world. The air grew drier, colder. And in the cold lay that smell Fenna had already sensed at the shaft: burnt sugar. Soot. Not real smoke, but a sensation that felt like smoke.

"It's getting stronger," Marei whispered.

Fenna nodded. She felt it too: The soot tugged at the edges of her thoughts, not with force, but with persuasion. It offered her sentences that sounded like truth: You are too late. It's burning upstairs. It's pointless downstairs. You are right to be afraid. You are right to be angry.

Justice. Always justice.

Fenna rang the bell once. The sound was almost too loud in the narrow passage, echoed briefly, and cut through the soot like a knife through cobwebs.

"Thank you," whispered Marei.

"Don't get used to it," said Fenna. "I don't have enough bells for the whole world."

"That would be a good business," Brann growled. "Bells against bad thoughts. You'll get rich with that."

Fenna almost laughed, but then she heard something that didn't come from them.

A quiet, regular clicking sound.

Not drops. Not ice that moves. Something mechanical. Like small steps on hard ground.

Fenna stopped. So did Brann. Marei held her breath, which no one noticed in the ice tunnel anyway, because down here the air was so thin that even breathing sounded faint.

"Do you hear that?" whispered Marei.

Fenna nodded. She raised the star compass. The bright streams in the glass twitched as if they had detected something. And at the edge of the net, a movement appeared – small, fast, restless.

"It's not Malrik," Fenna whispered. "Too small."

Brann pulled out the knife. "Then it's something Malrik sent."

The clicking grew louder. It came from the darkness ahead, from a bend in the corridor.

Then it came into view.

It was a toy.

A small, mechanical nutcracker, barely the size of Fenna's forearm. It walked on stiff wooden legs with metal joints. Its eyes were made of glass, but not friendly. They gleamed like two small pieces of ice. And in its hand it held something absurd in the mine shaft: a tiny lantern that didn't burn, but glowed. A cold, blue glow.

"This is...", Marei began.

"A piece from above," said Fenna.

The nutcracker stopped precisely where the ice beneath him formed a star-shaped line. He raised the lantern as if presenting it. Then he inclined his head, so mechanically polite that it makes your hair stand on end.

And then he spoke.

Not with a voice. With a small, creaking speaker noise, as if someone had carved a sentence in wood.

"Back."

The word wasn't loud, but it was heavy. It didn't sound like a command to be ignored. It sounded like a judgment one had always deserved.

Fenna immediately felt the soot in her head wanting to latch onto that word. Back. Yes. Back would be safe. Back would be logical. Back would be... right.

Brann took a step forward. "I'm not going back," he growled.

The nutcracker remained motionless. The lantern in his hand glowed a little brighter, and the ice lines on the ground flickered.

"Back," repeated the Nutcracker.

Marei whispered: "That's a guard."

Fenna nodded. "An old one."

"A broken one," Brann growled.

Fenna held the bell tightly but didn't ring it. She didn't just want to cut. She wanted to understand.

"Who sent you?" asked Fenna.

The nutcracker turned its head, creaking, as if it had to search for a term in its inner workings.

"Order."

Marei swallowed. "That's... not Malrik."

"Or maybe so," Fenna said quietly. "He uses words that belong at the top."

Brann leaned forward. "Order?" he growled. "This isn't a bedroom you can tidy up. It's a hole."

The nutcracker raised the lantern higher. The cold glow was suddenly like frost light. The ice lines on the ground glittered, and for a moment Fenna saw something in the pattern she hadn't seen before: It wasn't just a map. It was a seal.

The tunnel was sealed.

"He closed it," Marei whispered.

"Who?" asked Brann.

"Someone," said Fenna. "Someone before Malrik. Perhaps... the work itself. Or those who built it. They didn't want people walking through here."

The soot whispered to Fenna: Then go back. Then it won't be your fault.

Fenna felt how pleasant the sentence was. How comfortable. Like a warm blanket.

And that's when she knew: It's poison.

"We have to get through this," Fenna said quietly.

Marei nodded, her eyes hard. "Then we need the right rhythm. Heart Snow brought us down. Maybe... it will get us through too."

Brann growled. "Or I'll kick the nutcracker over."

The nutcracker reacted as if he had heard something. He took a step back, the lantern glowed brighter, and suddenly a fine line of frosty light stretched across the passage. Not a wall, but a boundary. One that said: If you cross it, something will happen.

"That's a trigger," Marei whispered.

"Then we'll trigger it," Brann growled.

"No," Fenna said sharply. "Malrik wants a trigger. He wants a commotion. He wants us down here to break something so that we up above can be blamed."

Brann paused, grinding his teeth.

Fenna took a deep breath. She placed her hand on the star compass. The bright streams within it were thin here, as if afraid of the seal. But they were there. And beneath them—very faintly—was another rhythm Fenna knew: the beat of the old song she had learned up above. It wasn't strong, but it was within her.

"I can start it..." Fenna whispered.

Marei looked at her. "Now? Here?"

Fenna nodded. "Don't sing. Just hold your form."

She rang the bell once, and immediately afterwards she began, very quietly, to feel the rhythm in her chest: Long. Short. Long. Pause. Long.

The nutcracker twitched slightly. Not like fear. More like a mechanism recognizing a familiar frequency.

The lantern glowed differently. Not less brightly. But more clearly.



Marei held the compass closer to the seal, and the bright lines became a touch stronger.

"It's reacting," Marei whispered.

The nutcracker creaked. Its head tilted. And then it said, in the same creaking voice, but with a different tone:

"Authorization."

Fenna swallowed. "He's asking if we can," she whispered.

Brann growled. "I'm allowed to do anything."

"No," said Fenna. "We have to... show that we are not Malrik."

Marei nodded. "We have to show that we want to heal. Not break."

Fenna felt the soot in the air resisting. Healing wasn't his word. Healing was boring. Healing was hard. Healing left no one right.

Fenna kept the beat nonetheless.

"Authorization," repeated the Nutcracker.

Fenna took the small metal container out of the suitcase. Inside lay Malrik's splinter, black, still, poisonous. She held it not like a trophy, but like a piece of evidence.

"We have the splinter," Fenna said quietly. "We've taken it out. We're taking it back. To the place where it... belongs. Or where it will stop bothering us."

The nutcracker stared at the container. His lantern flickered briefly.

Then he lowered them a little.

The frost light line in the corridor became thinner.

Marei exhaled. "That... was right."

Brann growled, but more quietly. "Then go ahead, before he changes his mind."

Fenna nodded, kept the beat, and together they approached the line, not running, not angry, but as one passes an old seal that one respects because otherwise it will devour one.

The nutcracker stepped aside.

The ice tunnel opened.

And the soot behind them whispered, offended, because it had just realized that one can also go through fear without feeding it.

The frost light line was still there.

She was just... agreed.

That's an important distinction, especially with things that could kill you if they're in a bad mood. "Agreed" means: I'll let you through, but I'm keeping an eye on you. And keeping an eye on you down here is a form of possession.

Fenna was the first to cross the line, the small metal container with the shard clutched in both hands, as if carrying a fragile truth. She expected it to feel cold, to sting, for the seal to offer some final protest. But nothing happened. No flash, no bang, no dramatic incantation. Just a brief pressure in her head, as if someone were checking if her thoughts were coherent.

Then she was over there.

Marei followed, her star compass close to her body. Brann came last and, as he passed, glanced at the Nutcracker, which seemed to say: If you move, I'll kick you anyway.

The nutcracker merely tilted its head.

"I hate polite dolls," Brann muttered as they continued walking.

The tunnel behind the seal was different. Not warmer—that would have been too pleasant—but...cleaner. The ice beneath my feet was clearer, the lines in the frost pattern less blurred. And the smell of burnt sugar was still there, but it was farther away, like smoke the wind won't let in.

"The seal keeps the soot out," Marei whispered.

Fenna nodded. "Or it keeps us inside."

"Both," Brann growled. "Like any good door."

The corridor widened, and recessed niches appeared in the walls, where lanterns had probably once hung. Some were empty. In one, a lingering frosty light still glowed, a bluish shimmer more reminiscent of moonlight than fire. Fenna noticed how her mind felt clearer in this light. As if it were organizing her thoughts without forcing them.

"That's... old light," Marei murmured. "Not from the sled core. Not from above. This is... workshop light. Before the magic."

Fenna frowned. "What do you mean?"

Marei stroked a niche, carefully. "In the past, magic wasn't 'fed in,'" she said. "In the past, it was... built. From ritual, from rhythm, from things that don't just flicker when someone gets angry."

Brann snorted. "So everything was better in the old days."

"No," said Fenna. "Everything used to be... broken in a different way."

They continued walking. The humming of the wrong beat was no longer everywhere, but only coming from the front. It was like a sound behind a wall: you hear it, but you know you're approaching the point where it comes through.

Fenna felt something else: a tug. Not from the soot. Something that was drawing her in. And that was even more dangerous, because attraction often disguises itself as hope.

"Don't let yourself be flattered," she whispered to herself.

Brann heard it and growled. "Who's flattering you down here?"

"The way," said Fenna.

Brann gave her a sideways glance. "If a Way starts talking to you, I'm officially out."

"He doesn't talk," Fenna said. "He... feels like he knows I need him."

Marei nodded slowly. "That's the trap. Paths that need you rarely need you for good reasons."

Fenna smiled, even though she was cold. "You sound like Alva."

Marei shrugged. "Alva is hard to ignore. She's like a piece of furniture you constantly bump into."

"A soft piece of furniture," Fenna murmured.

"I've experienced soft furniture that hurts a lot," Brann growled.

The corridor suddenly ended in a chamber.

Not large, but tall. The floor wasn't completely frozen, but partly stone, partly a thin layer of glassy frost. And in the middle of the chamber stood something that took Fenna's breath away because it seemed so out of place down here:

A gift.

A genuine gift, wrapped in red paper with a ribbon. It stood on a small stone pedestal, as if someone had deliberately placed it there for display. It wasn't dusty. Not damaged. It looked pristine. Too pristine.

Brann stopped. "No."

"Yes," whispered Marei.

Fenna raised her hand as if to stop herself. "This is... not real."

"It looks real," Brann growled. "That's the problem."

The soot hummed softly, and Fenna felt her mind immediately want to form a sentence: Perhaps it's helpful. Perhaps it's a clue. Perhaps...

Perhaps that was the word that Malrik loves.

Fenna rang the bell once. The sound cut through the room. The gift remained untouched. No reaction. Too quiet.

Marei raised the star compass. The bright streams didn't flow toward the gift. They passed by it as if it were air. The dark stream, however, coiled around it briefly, lovingly like a snake.

"It's bait," said Marei.

Brann growled. "Then we'll kick him away."

"No," Fenna said immediately. "Don't touch it."

Brann looked at her. "Why not?"

"Because he wants us to touch it," Fenna said. "Because he wants us to decide what it is. Because he wants us to judge. To say: This is wrong. This is right. This is..."

"...right," murmured Marei.

Fenna nodded. "Exactly."

She took a step to the side, keeping her distance from the base. The chamber had another exit, narrow, half-covered in ice. The star compass pointed clearly in that direction. Not toward the gift.

"We'll pass by," said Fenna.

Brann growled, but he obeyed. Marei followed Fenna.

As Fenna walked past the gift, she suddenly felt a wave of warmth. Not real warmth, but a memory. A memory of something she hadn't experienced, but knew nonetheless: a child opening a package. A laugh. A hand stroking her head. A feeling that she wasn't alone.

Fenna almost tripped.

"Fenna!" hissed Marei.

Fenna recovered and grabbed the wall. Her heart was racing. The soot whispered: This is real. Take it. You need it. You have a right to long for it.

"No," Fenna gasped.

Brann stepped closer. "What is it?"

Fenna breathed heavily. "He... uses memories."

Marei nodded, her eyes sharp. "He's taken a real gift from somewhere. Or a real memento. And he's... playing with it."

Brann's growl deepened, and Fenna felt the rage rising within him. It was understandable. It was justified. And that's precisely why it was dangerous.

Fenna rang the bell—this time twice in a row. The sound wasn't pleasant, but it was clear. The memory in her mind faded, as if someone had laid a cold hand upon it.

"Go on," said Fenna, her voice rough.

They went through the narrow exit of the chamber. The passage beyond was lower, the ice thicker. And here the smell of burnt sugar was stronger again, as if the soot were sulking at them because they had ignored its bait.

"He will try again," Marei whispered.

"Then we'll just ignore it again," Brann growled.

The corridor took a turn, and suddenly there was something that frightened Fenna even more than the gift.

A wall of ice.

Not natural. Not a smooth surface, but a frozen image, as if someone had cast a scene in frost. Shapes could be discerned in the ice wall: the Polar Court, the Dome, the Heart Tree... and in front of it, three figures who bore a striking resemblance to Fenna, Marei, and Brann. They stood there, and above them, the Dome shattered, glass fell, and fire rose. The scene was so detailed that Fenna briefly felt as if she were seeing into the future.

"This is...", Marei began.

"A threat," Brann growled.

Fenna stared at her own frozen image, which seemed to be watching in the ice wall as everything above was destroyed while she wandered around down here.

The soot whispered: If you continue, this will happen. You will be to blame. You are right to go back.

Fenna felt her throat tighten. Guilt is heavier than any box. Guilt is a sled you're pulling alone.

She rang the bell. Once. Then again.

The sound echoed, trembling in the ice. The image on the wall flickered briefly, and for a moment Fenna saw what lay behind it: Not the future. Not prophecy. Only patterns. Lines of soot. A trick.

"It's an illusion," Fenna said hoarsely.

Marei nodded. "He paints fear in ice."

Brann stepped closer and raised the knife.

“No!” Fenna cried immediately.

Brann paused, the knife trembling briefly in his hand. “Why not?”

“Because he wants you to break it,” Fenna said. “He wants you to feel strong. He wants you to play the hero who shatters the threat. And then...”

Marei whispered: “...then the seal will break. Or the tunnel. Or we will.”

Brann breathed heavily. Then he lowered the knife. “I hate it,” he growled. “I hate it when the right decision is boring.”

“The right decision is rarely spectacular,” said Fenna.

They walked past the ice wall, close to the rock face where the illusion was less intense. Fenna felt the illusion pulling at her, like a cold hand on her coat. But she continued, step by step, the rhythm in her chest, her eyes on the compass, the bell ready for an emergency.

And as they rounded the bend, they heard a soft crackling sound behind them.

Not the glass of the dome.

Down here.

A cracking sound, as if the illusion had briefly tried to become real – and injure itself in the process.

Marei whispered: “He's getting angry.”

Brann grinned into the darkness. “Good.”

Fenna felt the soot, felt the cold, felt the path.

And somewhere ahead of them, beyond the next arch, was the spring.

Not far.

But close enough that the incorrect beat no longer hummed backwards like background noise.

It sounded like a heart that didn't belong to that body.

## Malrik's truth

The path to the source didn't announce itself with a gate, not with a dramatic abyss, not even with a particularly malevolent echo. It announced itself with order.

And order, as Fenna had learned by now, was suspicious down here.

The ice lines beneath her boots grew denser, the star-shaped points in the frost pattern no longer random, but like deliberately placed nails. The humming of the wrong rhythm was now so close that it no longer vibrated in her gut, but directly behind her eyes. Like a second voice, wanting to chime in when you're thinking.

Brann took a step ahead of Fenna, preferring to tackle problems head-on. Marei gripped the star compass so tightly her knuckles were white. Fenna felt the bell in her pocket and hoped a small chime would suffice when the world began to convince itself.

The corridor led into a chamber that was so silent that silence suddenly became sound again.

The air was clearer here. Not warm, not friendly, but clear. As if someone had blocked out the soot so you could see better what was going to happen next. The ground was stone, but in the middle was a circle of frosted ice, and inside the circle stood something Fenna couldn't quite place.

It looked like a tree stump made of glass.

Not large, not majestic. More like the broken end of a column, transparent, layered within itself like old water. A faint light swam inside, not flickering, but pulsating, as if it were breathing. And around the stump, lines of ice ran like veins.

"This is... the connection," Marei whispered.

Brann growled. "Looks like an expensive drinking glass that someone has rammed into the ground."

Fenna stepped closer. The star compass vibrated. The bright currents in the glass moved toward the stump, as if trying to enter it. The dark current did the opposite: it circled it, searching for a crack, a flaw, a place to sneak in. Like a bad idea that only strikes you when you're tired.

"That's the source," Fenna said quietly.

And immediately the soot in her head whispered: Finally. Now you can solve everything. Now you are important.

Fenna rang the bell once, very softly. The sound was small, but it was honest enough to banish that sentence.

"We need to get the splinter out here—" Marei began, lifting the metal container that Fenna was still carrying.

"Not so fast," Brann growled.

Fenna felt it too. Not just the tension. Something else. A presence that wasn't made of ice. Someone who felt too secure.

"He is here," said Fenna.

Marei froze. "Where?"

Brann pulled out the knife without asking. "Show me."

A voice came from the chamber. Not from the air, not from the stump. From a dark side passage that had previously simply appeared as shadows.

"You are so polite when you come to visit."

The sentence was spoken gently, almost kindly. That's precisely what made it disgusting.

Malrik Splitterbart stepped into the light as if he owned it.

He was shorter than Fenna had expected, but that was often the case with people who cause big problems. They save on materials to make more room for intention. His cap sat crooked, as if being crooked was a conviction. His coat was dark, not just dirty, but deliberately dark, as if he'd borrowed the color from a night that doesn't like stars. And his beard... his beard was indeed split, like an old rope that's been ripped too many times. Two strands that never agreed to each other again.

He wasn't really smiling. He just pulled his mouth into a shape that pretended smiling was something for people with too much time on their hands.

"Malrik," said Fenna, and she realized she wanted to spit out his name like something bitter.

"Fenna," he said, as if they were colleagues who had bumped into each other in the hallway and pretended there were no knives involved. His gaze slid to Marei, then to Brann. "And you brought reinforcements. Nice. I have some too."

Brann looked around. "Where?"

Malrik raised a hand, and Fenna heard the same clicking sound they had heard before. Two more mechanical figures emerged from the side aisle: not nutcrackers, but small wooden soldiers with metal joints and icy eyes. Their lanterns glowed coldly.

"Order," said Malrik softly, and the word sounded to him like a favorite tool.

Marei whispered: "He reprogrammed the guards."

"No," said Fenna. "He convinced her."

Malrik inclined his head. "Oh," he said, "that's pretty. Really. You learn quickly. Maybe that's your problem."



Brann took a step forward. "Where is Ruby?"

Malrik sighed, as if burdened by a duty. "Always these animals," he said. "Always this symbolism. Always these noses. As if a red light in some reindeer's face could save the world."

"Where is he?" Brann repeated, and this time there was no growl, but a coldness harder than ice.

Malrik waved it off. "Not here," he said. "I don't bring loud, warm things to places that need quiet. And yes, I know how that sounds. I'm very aware of how everything sounds."

Fenna felt the air in the room grow thicker. Not because Malrik was working magic, but because Malrik was doing what he did best: leaving words like traps.

"You made a fire upstairs," said Fenna.

Malrik raised an eyebrow. "I showed above what happens when you rely too heavily on miracles," he said. "Miracles are unreliable. Wood is honest. Wood burns when you light it. Magic... is fickle."

Marei raised the star compass. "You've tapped into the sled's core."

"Of course," said Malrik. "Why should heat just be there without being used? That would be a waste. And a waste is..." He grimaced as if he had just bitten into something disgusting. "...immoral."

Fenna felt the soot inside her want to react to that sentence. Yes. Waste is bad. You're right. And immediately she realized how dangerous that was: Malrik was saying things that were fundamentally true, but in a sequence that could kill you.

She rang the bell once.

Malrik twitched almost imperceptibly. His eyes narrowed slightly, as if someone had thrown a tiny stone at him that had accidentally hit the sensitive spot.

"Ah," he said softly. "That sound. How cute. You've found a toy that doesn't break immediately if you use it honestly."

"Why?" asked Fenna.

The question slipped out before she could stop herself. It wasn't clever, not strategic. It was human. And Malrik loved human questions because they usually look like an answer, but are actually a point of attack.

He smiled that half-smile again. "Why?" he repeated. "Because you never asked."

"We're asking now," Brann growled.

Malrik raised both hands as if surrendering, and that image alone was wrong enough to enrage Fenna. Malrik never surrendered. Malrik only distributed.

“Because I worked,” he said calmly. “For centuries. Because I stood in that factory every day while a man in a red coat smiled upstairs and everyone said: How magical! How wonderful! And nobody said: How arduous. How cold. How often does that actually hurt?”

Marei inhaled sharply, as if she had cut herself on a sentence.

Malrik took a step closer to the glass stump. The light within it pulsed, and Fenna had the feeling that it paused briefly as he approached.

“Do you know what Christmas is?” Malrik asked. His voice was quiet, but it filled the room. “It’s a machine that runs on expectation. And expectation is the hungriest animal there is. It eats everything: joy, time, wood, people. And when it’s full, it eats even more because it has learned that it can.”

Brann growled. “You talk like a preacher.”

“No,” said Malrik. “Preachers want you to believe them. I just want you to realize how long you’ve been swallowing it.”

Fenna felt the soot in her head cheer. Yes. That's right. You're right. It's unfair.

And she realized that Malrik was now exactly where he wanted her to be: on the verge of agreeing with him, because agreement is like relief.

Fenna rang the bell. Once. Hard.

“And that's why you're kidnapping a reindeer?” she said, her voice sharp. “That's why you're burning down the farm? That's why you're making holes in sacks, turning clocks, flipping labels?”

Malrik blinked, as if briefly offended that she was reducing his art to this small, practical level. Then he shrugged. “The little things,” he said, “are the only ones that work. Big plans get seen. Small plans get believed.”

Marei whispered: “You want to stop Christmas.”

Malrik laughed softly, without joy. “Stop?” he repeated. “No. I want it to remember how it works without itself. I want it to fail once so it stops pretending to be infallible.”

Brann raised the knife. “That's a pretty fairy tale.”

Malrik's gaze slid to the knife, then back to Brann's eyes. “And you,” he said, “are angry because you believe anger is strength. But anger is just a fire you carry inside until someone else can use it.”

Fenna felt Brann tense up. That was mean, because it wasn't completely wrong.

Malrik looked at Fenna again. “My truth,” he said quietly, “is simple. I don't hate Christmas.”

He paused, long enough for the soot in the air to fill it.

"I hate the lying involved."

Fenna felt the glass stump in the middle of the chamber pulsate a little brighter, as if it had reacted to the sentence. Or as if it were afraid of it.

Marei raised the compass. The bright streams trembled. The dark stream coiled tightly around Malrik's feet, like a pet that feels loved.

"You are not alone," Marei whispered.

Malrik smiled that half-smile. "Was I ever like that?" he asked.

Fenna clutched the metal container with the shard. Her heart beat faster, not from fear, but because she sensed: This is the moment when he tries to weaponize truth.

And she had to find her own truth, one that didn't taste of soot.

When someone speaks the truth, it often sounds like the end of an argument.

In reality, it's usually just the beginning of something better.

Malrik stood there, his hands loose, a half-smile on his face, and Fenna felt the space around him begin to order itself. Not because he had created order—but because he acted as if order were his natural state. He was the kind of person who could stand upright in chaos, thereby making everyone else feel as if they were to blame if they wavered.

"I hate the lying involved," he had said.

And Fenna had to force herself not to like that sentence. Because it was pleasant. Because it sounded noble. Because for a split second, it made Malrik seem not like a saboteur, but a disillusioned idealist who simply wanted to set the world right.

The soot whispered: You see? He's not evil. He has his reasons. You're right to understand him.

Fenna rang the bell softly, once. Not as an attack. As a reminder.

"You're lying too," she said.

Malrik blinked. "Pardon?"

"You speak of truth," Fenna said calmly, "and use it like a knife. You say things that are true, but you say them in a way that cuts. That, too, is a lie. A lie about intent."

Brann growled in agreement, but held back, as if Fenna had just given him a rhythm to cling to.

Marei raised the star compass, holding it so that the light was reflected in the glass stub. The bright currents in the compass network trembled, as if afraid of what was happening in this chamber as an "argument".

Malrik laughed softly. "Oh," he said. "You want to teach me morals. How cute."

"No," said Fenna. "I just want to tell you that I'm not playing with you."

Malrik took a step closer, and the two mechanical wooden soldiers made a soft clacking sound simultaneously. Their lanterns glowed brighter, and the ice lines on the ground flickered. It looked as if the tunnel was briefly deciding whether it liked Fenna or not.

Fenna felt the impulse to retreat. Retreating is safe. Retreating is logical. Retreating is...

She rang the bell, this time hard.

The sound cut through the flickering. The soldiers' lanterns twitched, as if momentarily feeling guilty.

Malrik's gaze narrowed. "You really think that tone makes you feel safe," he said.

"He makes it clear to me," said Fenna.

"Clarity is overrated," said Malrik. "Clarity is just the moment before you believe something again."

"And you want us to believe you," Brann growled.

Malrik smiled. "I want you to believe in yourselves," he said. "That's much more dangerous."

Marei whispered: "Why the guards? Why down here? If you only wanted... the truth—"

"Because truth needs a place," Malrik said, his voice almost softening. "And that place is the Source. I have found it. I have seen how deep it goes. And I have understood that it is not just magic. It is... a contract."

Fenna looked at the stumped glass, the pulsating light within. Contract. The word sounded so... civilized. As if magic were a piece of paper you signed. But perhaps that was precisely the danger: contracts are always civilized until you read the fine print.

"What have you done?" asked Fenna.

Malrik shrugged. "I put the truth in it," he said, as if it were a perfectly normal working gesture. "I reminded the core what it is. Energy. Raw. Uninvolved. And I showed the work how dependent it had become."

Marei looked shocked. "You've reversed the beat."

"Not turned upside down," Malrik corrected. "Just... stripped. You've put so much shine on it that you've forgotten that underneath is just... pressure. And pressure always wants to go somewhere."

"Upwards," Fenna murmured, thinking of the crack in the dome.

Malrik nodded contentedly, as if Fenna had just given him a good grade. "Exactly," he said. "Upwards. Into you. Into your voices. Into your little squabbles. I didn't invent anything. I only loosened the lid."

Brann raised the knife. "And the fire?"

Malrik looked briefly annoyed. "Sparks are a symptom," he said. "Like a cough. If you have a cough, you don't beat your chest and say, 'There, cough gone.' You..." He made a gesture as if he were twisting something. "...change the air."

"You are poisoning them," said Fenna.

Malrik smiled again. "Isn't she already poisoned?" he asked. "By expectations? By smiles that have been unlearned because one has to deliver them? By this constant: It has to be perfect, otherwise..."

He left the sentence open, and Fenna felt the soot trying to fill that gap. Otherwise what? Otherwise it's your fault. Otherwise you're wrong. Otherwise you're not enough.

Fenna felt it inside herself, and it made her angry. Not at Malrik. At the fact that the sentence already existed within her. That Malrik had simply found it.

"You know the pain," Fenna said softly.

Malrik's eyes glittered briefly, and for a moment he didn't look like a saboteur, but like someone who had worked too long in a cold room. Then it was gone again. He was too good at hiding himself.

"Of course I know him," said Malrik. "I'm an elf who doesn't laugh. Remember?"

Fenna swallowed. She remembered. The elf who doesn't laugh. Not because he lacks a sense of humor, but because humor becomes too expensive if you constantly give it away.

"And now," said Malrik, "you want to repair the source. You want to put the shard back. You want to clean up the beat. You want everything to be the way it was."

"Yes," said Marei, and her voice was almost pleading, because Marei loves order like other people love breath.

Malrik looked at her, almost pityingly. "That's your problem," he said quietly. "You want order because you're afraid of what will happen when it's gone. And I..." He smiled. "...want to see what happens."

Brann took a step forward, raising the knife. "If you act like this is an experiment again, I'll cut you—"

"—the beard?" Malrik interrupted, his half-smile widening briefly. "Oh, please. Then you'd finally be as nitpicky as I am."

Brann froze, not because the sentence was funny, but because it had hit home. Pettiness is a weapon disguised as moral superiority.

Fenna placed her hand on Brann's arm. Not to stop him, but to tell him: Not his game.

Brann breathed heavily, lowering the knife slightly.

Malrik saw this, and a flash of annoyance flickered in his eyes. Not anger. Annoyance that his thread wasn't pulling immediately.

"You think you're the good guys," Malrik said. "But you're just the ones who have learned that you survive in a system by defending it. I don't defend it. I question it. And that makes me evil in your eyes."

"No," said Fenna. "That makes you dangerous."

Malrik inclined his head. "Dangerous is just another word for... honest."

"No," Fenna said again, and this time her voice was firm. "Dangerous is the word for someone who takes their wound and uses it to cut others open so they don't bleed alone."

Marei exhaled as if Fenna had just said something that Marei herself could not put into words.

Malrik's half-smile vanished. For a moment, there was only his face, naked, without that mask of superiority. And in that moment, Fenna saw that she had been right. Not morally. Practically.

Malrik had a wound.

And he held onto her like a splinter because she gave him at least something: a reason.

"You want Christmas to fail," Fenna said quietly. "Not so it will remember. But so you can prove that your pain... matters."

Malrik's gaze hardened. "My pain matters," he said quietly.

The soot in the air cheered because he loved that phrase. He wants pain to count, because then he can add it up until it becomes violence.

Fenna felt the glass stump in the center of the chamber pulsate faster. The light within it became restless, as if afraid of this argument.

Marei raised the compass. "If he keeps talking, the spring will tip over," she whispered.

Fenna nodded. "Then we won't talk anymore," she said quietly.

Malrik raised his hands slightly, as if to say: Ah, now we're getting practical. Good.

"You can try," he said, his voice gentle again. "Put the splinter back in. Heal the wound. Make your song. But there's something you don't understand."

Fenna looked at him, the bell in her hand.

"What?" she asked.

Malrik smiled again, that half-smile that sounds like rust.

"I am not the source," he said quietly. "I am only... what happens when you work in it long enough."

And then he stepped aside, as if making room – not for her, but for something behind him.

Fenna looked into the dark side passage.

And there, in the shadows, something was glowing.

No light.

Not fire.

Something that looked like an idea that hadn't yet found a body – but was already hungry.

The glow in the side passage was not bright.

It was rather... convincing.

Like a phrase you hear once and then can't get rid of. Like "You're not enough," only without words. The shadow didn't seem to be caused by the absence of light, but by the presence of something that dislikes light.

Marei instinctively took a step back. Brann instinctively took a step forward. Fenna remained standing still, because instinct was something Malrik liked to use very much that night.

"What is that?" whispered Marei.

Malrik didn't answer immediately. He savored the moment. Not because he laughed sadistically—Malrik rarely laughed—but because he loved that small feeling when someone else briefly understood how big the problem really was.

"That," Malrik finally said, "is the part that nobody talks about."

"The soot?" Brann growled.

Malrik slowly shook his head. "The soot is just the taste," he said. "This is... the cuisine."

Fenna felt the source – the stump of glass – pulsate faster. The light within it was no longer steady. It trembled as if reacting to something that came too close.

"You have awakened it," said Fenna.

Malrik shrugged. "I didn't wake it up," he said. "It was never completely gone. You just learned to ignore it. Like ignoring the wind when you get used to the cold."

Marei raised the star compass. The bright streams were now flowing not only toward the source, but also... away. As if they were fleeing. The dark stream, on the other hand, flowed

greedily toward the side channel, and Fenna saw it condense there, as if it were finally finding the place that was rightfully its.

"That's... a knot," Marei whispered. "A real one."

Brann growled. "Then we'll cut him in half."

"No," Fenna said immediately.

Brann turned around. "You keep saying no."

"Because you always want to cut it," Fenna snapped back. And then, more quietly: "And because that's exactly what he's waiting for."

Malrik smiled as if enjoying a lesson. "Brann," he said gently, "you are a wonderful hammer. But not everything is a nail. Some things are... doors."

"I kick down doors," Brann growled.

"I know," said Malrik.

Fenna sensed how the phrase irritated Brann. "I know" was one such phrase. It sounds harmless, but it's a hook. Malrik was full of hooks.

Fenna rang the bell once. Not for Brann. For herself. For the room.

The sound met the glimmer in the side passage, and for a tiny moment the shadow seemed to flicker, as if momentarily irritated. That was important. That meant: It reacted. It wasn't just a concept. It was a thing that could be disturbed.

Marei looked at Fenna. "It doesn't like the tone," she whispered.

Fenna nodded. "Then we'll like him more."

Malrik snorted softly. "Bells," he said. "Always bells. As if you could wipe away centuries with a single sound."

"You can't wipe them away," Fenna said. "But you can... interrupt them."

Malrik took a step closer to the source, and Fenna immediately felt the room tilt. The light in the glass fragment contracted, as if protecting itself. The ice lines on the floor began to flicker. Not like fire, but like a net pulled too tight.

"If you go any closer," said Marei, her voice thin, "it will tip over."

Malrik looked at her. "Maybe it should tip over," he said. "Maybe it should show us what it's really like. Maybe we should all see that Christmas isn't an angel, but a machine."

"And then what?" asked Fenna.

Malrik smiled that half-smile again. "Then," he said quietly, "then they can be rebuilt."



"Out of your hatred," Brann growled.

"Out of your hypocrisy," Malrik retorted.

The glow in the side passage intensified, as if it were devouring these words. Fenna felt the soot in the air suddenly increase again, even though the seal was behind them. It wasn't just in the air anymore. It was in the room. In the sentences.

"Stop it," Marei said suddenly, surprisingly harshly. "Stop talking. You're feeding it."

Malrik looked at her, briefly puzzled. Then he chuckled softly. "Oh," he said. "The little one got it."

Marei turned red with anger, and Fenna sensed how dangerous that was. Anger isn't evil. Anger is just... open. And open doors are bad down here.

Fenna approached the stump of glass. She knelt down and placed the metal container with the shard next to the circle of icy frost. She felt the pulsing of the light like a heart beneath thin skin.

"Marei," whispered Fenna. "Help me."

Marei also knelt, holding the star compass over the circle. The bright streams in the glass began to organize themselves, as if grateful that someone was finally doing something again that wasn't shouting.

"What are you doing?" Brann asked quietly.

"I'm trying," Fenna said, "to return the splinter. Not as a cure. As... closure."

Brann swallowed the impulse to say something, and that was probably the bravest thing he had done that day.

Malrik didn't come any closer. He stood there and watched, as if it were his own theater. "You really think you can fix a system by putting back a small black stone," he said quietly.

Fenna didn't answer. She opened the metal container.

The splinter lay there like a piece of night. It didn't shine. It absorbed the light. Fenna felt her mind immediately offer a sentence: It's all his fault. You're right to hate him.

She didn't ring the bell. She simply kept the rhythm in her chest, this long-short-long that Alva had taught her, and kept her hand still.

She took the splinter.

That was the moment when the room truly reacted.

The glow in the side passage suddenly intensified, as if recognizing the black piece. The light in the glass stump pulsed faster. The ice lines on the floor began to shimmer, as if deciding whose side they were on.

"No!" cried Marei, startled. "Not so fast!"

Fenna remained calm. She held the splinter over the circle.

Malrik took a step forward, and his voice became sharp. "You have no idea what you're doing."

"Yes," said Fenna, without looking at him. "I'm doing the one thing you're not doing. I'm ending it."

Malrik froze as if she had hit him.

"I'm ending it," Fenna repeated quietly. "You keep things open so they keep bleeding because otherwise you have nothing to hold on to."

The glow in the side aisle flickered as if offended that Fenna was no longer arguing.

Brann growled deeply, as if he longed to pounce on the thing in the shadows. Fenna felt his anger rising, and she knew: if Brann went for it now, he'd feed it.

"Brann," Fenna said softly.

Brann did not reply.

"Brann," Fenna repeated, and there was no command in her voice, but an anchor. "Hold. Just hold."

Brann breathed heavily, and then—surprisingly—he lowered the knife slightly. Not because he was suddenly peaceful. Because he believed Fenna. A little.

Fenna lowered the splinter.

The moment the black stone touched the ice frost line, something happened that didn't feel like magic, but like... mechanics.

The circle is complete.

The ice lines contracted, the star points in the frost pattern suddenly stood still. The pulsing in the glass stump became calmer, as if it had been given air. The dark stream in the star compass twitched, as if something had been pulled away from it.

And the glow in the side aisle... screamed.

Not loud. Not audible. But Fenna felt it in her head, like a pressure saying: No. Don't close it. Don't end it. Leave it open. Let it continue. Let it burn.

Malrik flinched, as if he too had felt the scream. His eyes widened, and for a moment he actually looked... frightened.

"What have you done?" he whispered.

Fenna looked up. "I didn't heal your wound," she said softly. "I just stopped using it."

Malrik stared at her. His half-smile was gone. His face was open. Naked. And in that nakedness lay something Fenna hadn't expected:

Fear.

Don't be afraid of them.

Fear that something he has awakened no longer belongs solely to him.

The glow in the side passage grew. It was no longer just a shadow. It became denser, as if a form were taking shape there. Not a body. More like an attitude. A silhouette of "being right."

"It's coming," whispered Marei.

Brann raised the knife again.

Fenna rang the bell once, loudly enough that the sound stood out in the room like an edge.

The glow flickered.

Not gone.

But disturbed.

"Then we'll go," said Fenna.

"Where to?" gasped Marei.

Fenna looked back towards the corridor, at the seal, at the line they had crossed. "Out," she said.

Malrik suddenly laughed, a short, hoarse laugh. "You think you can just leave?" he hissed. "You started it! You provoked it!"

"You provoked it," Fenna said calmly. "We just... noticed it."

Malrik took a step as if he wanted to cut them off.

Brann stepped in between.

"No," Fenna hissed.

Brann turned his head towards her, his eyes wild. Fenna held his gaze.

"Stop," she simply said.

Brann trembled. Then he took a half step back—not out of cowardice, but out of discipline. Out of this newly learned, terrible courage: not to do what feels good.

Fenna grabbed Marei's arm. "Now."

They didn't run. They walked quickly but deliberately back down the corridor, the bell in their hands, the rhythm in their chests. Behind them, the glow swelled, and the chamber seemed to breathe, as if spitting out something that had been stuck for a long time.

Malrik's voice came later, no longer gentle, no longer didactic. Panicked.

"You don't understand!" he shouted. "It wants—"

His sentence broke off as if something had entered his mouth.

Fenna heard no sound. But she felt the room behind them briefly darken, as if someone had blown out a light.

And then, right behind her neck, something whispered.

Not Malrik's voice.

Not Brann's growl.

Not Marie's breath.

Something new, it sounded like a smile without a mouth.

"Right."

Fenna froze for a heartbeat – and then pulled herself forward, because she knew: If you stop, it's already inside you.

## Hunting over the North Sea

Up at the North Pole, it's easy to forget how big the world is.

Not because it isn't big, but because at Polarhof, they're mostly busy folding things into small, manageable sizes: paper, ribbon, time, hope. They pack the world into boxes until it pretends to fit in a sack.

Out there, above the North Sea, nothing fit into anything else.

The sea was a black expanse that pretended to be still, though in truth it was constantly working. Ice floes drifted like unfriendly thoughts, unable to decide whether to hold together or break apart. The wind wasn't wind at all, but a judgment telling you to your face that you didn't belong there.

And in this judgment they hunted.

Not in the air, not with glittering runners and starlight. But on a sled that knew more ground than sky, pulled by reindeer that were clearly less keen to be part of an adventure today.

Tilo held the lead rope of the lead animal, his fingers so cold they felt as if someone had deprived them of their sense of touch. The convoy was out of the tunnel, through the outer camp, along a narrow route to the coast. And now there was only ice, wind, and a sky not kind enough to offer any help.

"I just wanted to say," Tilo gasped as the sled rumbled over a frozen edge, "that I don't officially see this as part of my job profile."

The stable elf next to him, a broad-shouldered fellow named Karr, who smelled of hay and always looked as if he'd carried the world three times over, grunted. "You're here," Karr said.

"Yes," said Tilo. "That's exactly my problem."

Behind them came the other sleds. Boxes full of gifts, strapped down, covered with tarpaulins. No glitter. Just weight.

And in front of them: the North Sea.

"Why exactly are we out here?" Tilo shouted against the wind.

Karr pointed ahead. "Traces," he said.

Tilo blinked. "Tracks? On ice? In the wind?"

Karr demonstrated again, more patiently than if he were explaining how to breathe to a child. On a wide ice floe, grooves were indeed visible. Not from ordinary sled runners. Narrower. Deeper. Like the edge of a device designed not to slide, but to cut.

"That's not our route," Tilo muttered.

"Exactly," said Karr.

They weren't out here delivering presents. Not anymore.

They were out here because something else was being delivered. Something you don't want to pack in boxes.

Ruby Rednose

The message had arrived an hour earlier: A scout had found tracks on the coast leading north, across ice floes, towards open water. And alongside them, a mark, etched in ice: a splinter. Two strands. Malik's handwriting.

Klirr didn't discuss it for long. The first convoy was split. The gifts were to be delivered as best as possible. A small group was to follow the trail. Not because it was wise, but because without the ruby, many things were darker than they could afford.

Santa Claus hadn't come along himself. He'd stayed at the factory because someone there had to hold their breath. But he'd given Klirr a look that said: Get him back. No matter what.

Klirr had taken this look as if it were an order and pressed it into Tilo's hands without asking him if he had strong hands.

So Tilo was out here.

Beside him were Karr, two guards, a card elf who constantly cursed because cards wanted to fly in the wind, and a woman Tilo didn't know: a hunter from the outposts, with a coat made of fur and a voice that sounded like she was grinding snow edges.

"Name," Tilo had asked when she had climbed aboard.

"Siv," she had said. "And you?"

"Tilo," he had said.

"Tilo is not a hunting name," Siv had replied.

"I'm not... hunting-related either," Tilo had said.

Siv smiled, briefly. "We'll see."

Now Siv stood at the front of the sled, a rope around her waist to keep her from being thrown into the sea in case of a sudden jolt, staring at the tracks. Her eyes were sharp, like the edge of an axe. She bent down, ran her hand over the grooves, and Tilo saw her face change for a moment.

"That's fresh," said Siv.

Karr grunted. "How fresh?"

"Too recent," said Siv. "Whoever did this isn't far away."

Tilo swallowed. "That's... bad."

"This is hunting," said Siv.

They followed the tracks. Across one ice floe, then to the next, over a spot where the ice was thinner and crunched under their weight. Tilo held his breath and pretended to be someone who didn't constantly think about how cold water is.

"If I fall into the sea," he said, more to himself, "that's the end. And I'd like to emphasize that the sea is not a good idea."

"Hold on tight," Karr said.

"This is not a philosophy, this is an order," Tilo muttered.

Siv raised his hand. Everyone stopped.

The wind whistled. The sea was moving. Somewhere a flounder cracked.

Siv knelt down and put her ear to the ice.

Tilo stared at her. "You... hear the ice?"

"I can hear if it's lying," Siv said.

Tilo wanted to laugh, but realized it wasn't a joke.

Siv raised her head. "There," she said. "An engine."

"We have no engines," said the card team.

"Exactly," said Siv.

Tilo felt himself getting cold, even though he was already cold. Engines meant something that didn't belong to the factory. Something modern. Something foreign.

Or something that Malrik built, because he uses everything that works.

They drove on, faster, the reindeer panting. The sky remained black, and somewhere far away a thin strip of northern lights shimmered, as if the world were briefly showing that it could theoretically be beautiful if it wanted to.

Then Tilo saw it.

On a large patch of earth stood a small structure made of wood and metal. A frame, a post, a kind of windmill with slats that rotated slowly. And something was tied to it – to a crossbeam.

A reindeer.

Ruby.

The red nose glowed faintly, not proudly, not brightly. More like a breath that can't decide if it's still there.

"Ruby," Tilo whispered.

Karr made a sound somewhere between a growl and a prayer.

Siv raised her hand. "Slowly," she said.

Tilo wanted to run. He felt it in his body, this "now, immediately, save!" And right then he knew: this is dangerous. This is the soot. This is the same kind of impulse that Fenna is fighting down below.

He forced himself to breathe slowly.

Then he saw the second thing.

Malrik Splitterbart stood next to Rubin.

Not in a red coat, not with fairytale allure. He stood there like someone who had waited too long on a cold patch of ice and yet didn't feel the cold, because he had long since frozen inside. His beard was split, his cap askew. In his hand he held a small device that looked like a clock without hands.

He raised his gaze.

And smiled that half-smile.

“Ah,” he called against the wind. “You have come.”

Tilo wanted to scream. Instead, he only managed to say: "Let him go!"

Malrik inclined his head. "That's not a greeting," he said.

“That’s a demand!” Tilo exclaimed, and he was surprised himself at how much his voice was trembling.

Malrik looked at him as if he were categorizing Tilo. "You're not Klirr," he stated.

“No,” said Tilo. “But I’m here.”

Malrik smiled. "That's the worst part," he said. "You're always here."

Siv took a step forward, the rope in her hand. "You're leaving," she said.

Malrik laughed softly. "I'm standing on ice," he said. "Where should I go?"

“Away from Rubin,” said Siv, her voice flat.

Malrik looked at Rubin, reached out, and stroked the reindeer's forehead as if calming a pet. Rubin flinched. His nose glowed briefly brighter, then fainter again.

Tilo felt a pang in his stomach. It was so wrong that Malrik's hand was there.

"Why?" Tilo exclaimed. "Why Ruby?"

Malrik looked up, and in his eyes was something Tilo hadn't expected: not joy. Rather... tiredness.

“Because you’re afraid without light,” said Malrik. “And when you’re afraid, you’re more honest. That’s all.”

Siv lifted the rope. "Final warning," she said.

Malrik lifted the small device in his hand. "And this is mine," he said.

Tilo saw the blades on the wind turbine spin faster. Not because of wind. Because of something else. As if the device in Malrik's hand was setting a rhythm.



And suddenly Tilo heard it: a faint humming that began in his head. A backwards rhythm, like the soot, only... thinner. Still there.

Malrik had taken more than just ruby.

He had set the ice into his own rhythm.

And the North Sea is not a place where you can let a wrong beat run without it breaking.

The buzzing didn't creep through the ears.

It crept through my knees.

Through the parts of the body where we maintain balance without thinking about it. And as soon as balance becomes a conscious thought, it's usually already gone.

Tilo first sensed it as a tiny uncertainty, as if the ice beneath him had decided to have an idea. The sleigh stood still, the reindeer pawed restlessly, but suddenly there was this feeling in the air: the ground is not ground, but a suggestion.

Siv remained calm. That was perhaps the most uncanny thing about her: she was so calm that even the wind briefly considered whistling more quietly.

"He's playing with the flounder," she said softly.

Karr growled. "He can't—"

"Yes," said Siv. "Not with force. With rhythm."

Tilo stared at Malrik's hand, at the small, handleless clock he held aloft like a trophy. It looked ridiculous, so small, so inconspicuous. And that was precisely Malrik's style: the knife doesn't have to be big if you know where to use it.

Rubin stood tied to the crossbeam. He was quiet, too quiet. His red nose glowed faintly and flickered as if fighting against the humming. Tilo suddenly had the feeling that Rubin wasn't just light—Rubin was rhythm. A heartbeat that tells the darkness which way is up.

And Malrik turned the beat.

"Stop that," Tilo shouted, and it sounded pathetic because it was so human.

Malrik looked at him. "Why?" he asked back. "Because it scares you?"

Tilo pressed his lips together. He didn't want to answer because any answer would be fodder for Malrik. But the soot in his head whispered: Say it. Say you're afraid. You're right.

Tilo reached into his pocket and felt the small bell Fenna had given him. He hadn't used it since they'd set off. He hadn't thought he'd need it because, frankly, he hadn't thought his life would fall into the category of "bells saving the day."

He pulled them out.

Karr saw it and raised an eyebrow. "What is that?"

"Hope in metal form," Tilo murmured.

Siv glanced at him briefly. "Can she break the beat?" she asked.

Tilo swallowed. "She... makes things clear," he said.

"Then do it," said Siv.

Tilo rang the doorbell.

Once.

The sound was small, but in the open, cold wind it sounded like a nail being driven into a sentence.

The humming in his head stumbled briefly. Not gone away. But irritated, as if it had just heard a mistake in its own song.

Malrik's gaze twitched. His eyes narrowed. "Ah," he said softly. "So you've bought yourselves some toys too."

"Free Rubin!" Karr shouted now, and his voice was like a stable door slamming shut.

Malrik didn't laugh. He lifted the clock a little higher, and the slats on the frame spun faster. The humming grew louder. Tilo felt the ice beneath the sled begin to crackle—not loudly, but it was the crackling sound of things considering whether to separate.

Siv took a step forward, the rope ready, her body low, like a cat before a leap. "If the ice breaks, you'll die too," she said.

Malrik smiled that half-smile. "I'm not afraid of the cold," he said. "Cold is honest. Cold promises nothing."

"The sea doesn't promise anything either," Karr growled.

Malrik shrugged. "Then we agree."

Rubin raised his head. His red nose glowed briefly brighter, as if he were trying to answer himself. And at that moment, Tilo saw something that took his breath away: across Rubin's forehead lay a thin band of black soot, like a line drawn to mark something. Not visible like paint, but palpable like heaviness.

Malrik had not only tied Rubin down.

He had him... connected.

"He's using it," Tilo whispered.

Siv looked more closely. "He pulls his nose like an anchor," she murmured. "When Rubin shines, he can keep the beat. And when he keeps the beat..."

"Then he carries the clod," Tilo gasped.

Malrik nodded as if he had just solved a riddle for them and was generous enough to give them the solution. "You're clever when you're cold," he said. "Perhaps I should let you freeze more often."

Karr growled. "You're sick."

"No," said Malrik calmly. "I am logical."

Siv pulled the rope tighter. "We'll get him," she said quietly, more to herself than to the others.

"How?" whispered Tilo.

Siv looked at him. "You're distracting him," she said.

Tilo blinked. "How do you distract Malrik?"

"With you," Siv said.

Tilo wasn't sure whether that was an insult or a plan.

He swallowed and took a step forward, far enough that Malrik could not ignore him, but not so far that the ice beneath him would immediately decide to stage a demonstration.

"You want us to be honest," Tilo shouted against the wind. "Fine. I'll be honest: I don't understand how someone can waste so much energy destroying everything just so they can say they were right!"

The sentence was impulsive, and Tilo immediately felt the soot pulling him in one direction: even louder, even angrier, even more self-righteous. But he held the bell in his hand like a handle to grip when his head starts to slip.

Malrik looked at him, really looked at him. "You're not important enough to be angry," Malrik said.

That sentence was like a knife through soft flesh. Not because it was true, but because it knew exactly the spot where Tilo had always been insecure.

Tilo felt anger surge hotly into his chest. He wanted to scream. He wanted to prove to Malrik that he was important. The soot cheered: Yes! Show it! Be right!

Tilo rang the bell hard.

The sound cut through his own rage. He stumbled over the noise and briefly caught his breath.

“Perhaps,” Tilo said hoarsely, “I’m not important. But Rubin is. And the children are. And the work is. And...” He swallowed. “...and you too, probably. Unfortunately.”

Malrik blinked. For a moment he actually looked irritated, as if he hadn’t expected someone to attribute importance to him without hating him for it.

That was the opening.

Siv jumped.

Not grand, not heroic, but precise. She threw the rope, and it flew not like a lasso from a song, but like a tool. It wrapped itself around Malrik’s wrist, right where he held the watch.

Malrik jerked his hand back, but the rope pulled, and for a moment he lost the perfect control he loved so much. The clock wobbled.

The humming stopped.

The ice crunched – this time differently, less threateningly, more like ground that is briefly relieved to be ground again.

Karr started running, his heavy boots on the ice, which was actually a bad idea, but sometimes the bad idea is the only one that’s fast enough.

“Ruby!” he roared, not as a shout, but as a promise.

Malrik pulled on the rope, trying to draw Siv towards him, but Siv was firmly anchored. She had wrapped the rope around her waist, and her stance was so low that she looked as if she were pulling not against Malrik, but against the world.

Tilo saw Malrik’s eyes narrow. He wanted to say something, something poisonous, something that would tear the others apart.

Tilo rang the bell again.

The sound wasn’t loud, but it was there. Clear. And clarity is precisely what disturbs Malrik’s movement.

Karr reached Rubin and tugged at the knot that held him. The knot was complicated. Of course it was. Malrik doesn’t tie anything simply because simple knots are easy to untie, and Malrik hates that.

"Hold still," Karr gasped at the reindeer, as if Rubin had deliberately gotten himself into trouble.

Rubin panted, his nose was burning, and for a moment Tilo sensed something in the air: a warm tone, as if Rubin himself were trying to drown out the wrong rhythm.

Then Malrik slammed his free hand onto the frame.

The slats started rotating again.

The buzzing jumped up.

And the ice responded immediately.

A crack ran through the ice floe, not where they were standing, but precisely between them and the path back. A long, black fissure that opened like a mouth.

Siv cursed softly. "He's cutting us off."

Tilo stared at the crack. The wind whistled across it as if it were pleased.

Malrik smiled again, that half-smile, but this time it wasn't mild. It was cold.

"You want Ruby?" he cried. "Then come and get him. But quickly. The sea has patience."

The crack in the ice was not a dramatic abyss with an echo.

He was simply there.

A black rift that split the world in two: "here" and "soon gone." No water was visible, but its presence was known. The Arctic Ocean doesn't need to reveal itself to be understood. It's enough that it waits.

Tilo stood at the edge of the gap and had the absurd feeling that his life had just drawn a line and now expected him to decide which side he wanted to be on.

"He separated us," said the card player, as if he had just made a geographical discovery.

"No," Siv growled. "He invited us."

Malrik stood over there, the rope still around his wrist, but he was holding the clock tightly. Karr was with Rubin, at the crossbeam, tugging at the knot, cursing in a language that probably only existed in the stable. Rubin stood still, but you could see from his ears that he heard the world very clearly.

"Karr is over there," Tilo whispered. "And we are... here."

"He wanted one of us to be on the other side," Siv said. "So that we would have to decide whom to save."

The sentence hit Tilo like a blow because it sounded exactly like Malrik: decisions as knives.

The soot in Tilo's head whispered: You're right to be afraid. You're right not to jump. You're not important enough to die.

And that's when Tilo realized that the soot wasn't just Malrik's tool. It was also a lazy part of himself, one that liked to feel clever while actually being cowardly.

Tilo reached for the bell and rang it once. The sound was small, but it was like a hand on the shoulder: You are here. Now. Not in fear.

"How do we get across?" asked one of the guards, her voice rough.

Siv looked at the gap. "We're not jumping," she said. "We're building."

"On ice?" gasped the guard.

"On ice," Siv said. "Ice is like people. If you don't insult it, it lasts longer."

She pulled a rope from her coat. "Anchor points," she said, her gaze falling on the reindeer. "The animals."

Karr shouted over there: "I can't get the knot! It's—"

"—an asshole," Tilo shouted back, and he wasn't just referring to the knot.

Malrik raised his hand and waved, almost friendly. "You guys are so creative when you're under pressure," he exclaimed.

Siv growled. "Give us the rope," she said to the guards.

They stretched a rope across the gap, attached it to a sled hook, a reindeer harness, anything that wouldn't break immediately. The rope wasn't taut—it was too long, too little support—but it was a start. Siv took a second rope, tied it to the first, made a loop, and slid it over the first, as if building some kind of makeshift zip line.

"You first," she said to Tilo.

Tilo stared at her. "Me?"

"You have the bell," Siv said. "And you're light enough that the ice isn't immediately offended. Over. Now."

Tilo wanted to say: I'm not easy, I'm just normal. He wanted to say: This is insane. He wanted to say: I'm going to die.

Instead, he nodded, because on that night nodding was faster than arguing.

He took the rope and wrapped it around his wrists, just as Siv had shown him. He felt the cold creep through his gloves, as if greeting him personally. Then he pulled himself across the gap using the loop, sliding, clammy, and for a moment he hung over the black crevice and thought: So this is the sound that frightens when she can't speak.

He landed on the ice over there, slid half a meter, and caught himself. Immediately he rang the bell, a reflex, as if he had to remind the world that he still existed.

"Good," Siv called from across the way. "Now the guard duty!"

One guard followed, then the other. Everyone slipped, everyone cursed, everyone landed. No heroics. Just movement.

Meanwhile, Malrik stood there and watched. He let them. He could have cut the rope. He could have turned the clockwork a different way. He didn't.

Because he wanted something different.

He wanted them to push themselves beyond their limits.

Karr was still tugging at the knot, his fingers already bleeding. "This damn thing is doubled up," he gasped. "It'll hold until the world ends."

"Then it won't end," Tilo growled, stepping closer. He saw the knot. It wasn't just doubled. It was... beautiful. Malrik had deliberately made it beautiful, as if the knot itself were a small work of art born of despair.

Tilo suddenly understood: Malrik doesn't just want to hold on. He wants you to admire how well he holds on.

"Don't look at it," Tilo murmured to himself. "Don't admire it."

He took the bell from his hand, held it between himself and the knot, and rang it softly, once. The tone was clear. And suddenly the knot looked different: no longer like art, but like yarn and logic.

"There," said Tilo. "There's the mistake."

Karr blinked. "What mistake?"

"The one he needs to make you think you're too stupid," Tilo said. "Here. If we solve this, the rest will fall into place."

Karr stared at him, then nodded, because stable elves don't have time to be surprised.

They worked together. Karr pulled, Tilo slipped a finger into the small gap, untied one loop, then another. The knot gave way, stubbornly, resentfully. Rubin shifted restlessly, his nose briefly glowing brighter, as if he were helping them.

Malrik exclaimed: "You really enjoy untying knots, don't you? It's almost... Christmassy."

Tilo ignored him. That was harder than the rope, but he managed. He held the sound of the bell within him, the rhythm of "clear".

The last loop came undone.

Rubin was free.

Karr grabbed the reindeer by the halter. Rubin snorted, took a step, and his nose glowed more intensely, as if he had suddenly gained breath.

And at that same moment, something happened that Tilo hadn't expected: The buzzing in his head subsided. Not gone. But fainter. As if Rubin had briefly offended the wrong beat.

Malrik's half-smile trembled.

"Ah," he said softly. "There it is. The light."

Siv was across by then, with a jump so controlled it almost impressed the ice. She glanced at Rubin. "Good," she said. Then she looked at Malrik. "Now you."

Malrik lifted the clock. The blades on the frame spun faster again, and the crack in the ice beneath them creaked. The gap widened. Water could be heard now. Not loudly. But enough to know that the sea had something to talk about today.

"You can't all go back," Malrik shouted, his voice suddenly no longer gentle. "The ice won't support your heroism!"

Karr pulled Rubin back towards the rope. Rubin resisted briefly, because animals don't like crossing crevices where nothing dwells. Karr spoke to him softly, not with commands, but with the honest truth of the stable.

Tilo looked at the rope, the makeshift slide. "We have to go back," he shouted.

Siv nodded. "You go first with Ruby," she said.

"I-"

"You," Siv said.

Tilo tugged on the halter. Rubin snorted, his nose glowing, and suddenly Tilo had the feeling Rubin understood that this wasn't just about rescue. It was about direction. Rubin took a step, then another, cautiously, his head down, as if trying to defy gravity.

Malrik took a step closer to the crack. His gaze was fixed on Rubin. "If you leave," he said softly, "the light will go out. And then they'll see how dark it is."

Tilo felt rage. Hard, burning rage. He wanted to scream at Malrik, hit him, push him into the water.

The soot rejoiced.

Tilo rang the bell. Once. Hard.

The anger remained, but it no longer controlled the mind. It became... energy.

"You can keep the darkness," Tilo shouted, his voice rough. "We'll take the light."

Rubin glowed as if he had heard the sentence.

Siv pushed Tilo and Rubin towards the zip line. "Go!" she shouted.

Tilo led Rubin to the crevice. Rubin hesitated, his nostrils wide. Beneath them, the sea gurgled, patiently, hungrily.



Tilo breathed, held the halter tightly, and whispered to Rubin: "I'm scared too."

Rubin blinked.

And then he jumped.

Not wild. Not heroic. A controlled leap, across the gap, onto the other ice. His nose glowed brightly, and for a moment it seemed as if the light itself were building a bridge.

Tilo slid after him, pulled himself over the rope, landed, gasped, and held onto Rubin.

Over there Siv shouted: "Now it's our turn!"

Karr followed, then the guards. One almost slipped, then caught himself. The rope tightened, creaking. The ice cracked. The crevasse widened even further. The world was about to open its mouth.

Malrik was still standing over there.

He could have jumped. He could have saved himself. He didn't. He merely lifted the clock-thing, and his gaze was fixed on Ruby, as if Ruby were not a reindeer, but a judgment abandoning him.

"You think you've won," Malrik shouted across the wind. "You don't understand—"

The sentence was swallowed because the ice beneath Malrik suddenly broke.

Not dramatic, not slow. Just a jolt. A split. A hole.

Malrik's eyes widened. For a moment there was no mask, no half-smile, no philosophy. Just a person on a piece of ice that had just decided to stop carrying him.

Siv took a step forward. "Rope!" she shouted.

Tilo looked at her. "We... save him?"

Siv narrowed her eyes. "We're saving him because we're not like him," she said.

The sentence hurt because it was true.

They threw a rope. It flew, a short one too short, then a second, then a third. Malrik grabbed it, missed, slipped. The water lapped at the edge, black, cold, ready.

And at that moment, as Malrik extended his hand, Tilo saw something in his gaze: not hatred.

Panic.

And something that looked almost like a request.

Then Malrik's hand withdrew.

Not because he couldn't reach the rope.

But because he didn't want to.

He let himself fall.

Just like that.

As if this were his final act: a decision that no one can take away from him.

The water swallowed him silently.

Rubin's nose glowed brightly, as if the light itself were briefly swallowed.

Tilo stood there, the bell in his hand, and felt the soot whisper in his head: You see? He's right. It's dark. It always ends like this.

Tilo didn't ring the doorbell.

He said quietly, to no one and to everything: "No."

And then they pulled in the ropes, tied Rubin up, and the convoy set off again – over ice, over wind, over a sea that had just swallowed a man who preferred to fall rather than be held.

And Tilo knew: Malrik might be gone.

But it wasn't his tact.

## The City of Forgotten Gifts

Some places don't exist because they were built.

They exist because something hasn't been picked up.

The City of Forgotten Gifts was such a place.

It wasn't on any map. It lay in the gap between "should have arrived" and "never arrived." A spot on the edge of the world where things end up that no one missed because no one knew they were ever on their way.

Tilo would have liked to claim that they'd only ended up there by chance. That would have been a nice, reassuring version of the story. But the star compass—now in his hands because Marei had somehow had to retrieve it from the top without anyone asking how—pointed in that direction, as if saying: There's still something open here. And open things are especially hungry tonight.

Rubin Rednose was back in her harness, her nose glowing more steadily than before, but not as proudly as usual. More like someone just realizing that light is tiring. Siv led the group;

Klirr had rejoined them—she'd joined them somewhere along an outside route, as if she'd consulted the snow itself to see where she was needed. Alva wasn't there. The Heart Tree wasn't there. Only wind, ice, and the kind of silence that feels like the world is writing a bill.

"Tell me again," Tilo murmured as the sled glided over a snow edge, "why we don't just go home."

Klirr didn't answer immediately. She walked beside the sled as if walking were a statement. Then she said, "Because 'home' is everywhere right now."

"That's not an answer," said Tilo.

"Yes," said Klirr. "It's the only one."

Siv stopped and raised his hand.

Ahead of them lay fog. Not ordinary fog, the kind that simply forms from the cold. This fog was... sticky. It hung lower, it didn't move in the wind. It looked as if someone had left it there.

Rubin's nose glowed a little brighter as they came closer, as if the light didn't like the fog.

"There it is," Siv said quietly.

Tilo blinked. "Is there something there? I only see—"

The fog parted, not because of the wind, but because they were getting closer. And behind it, something appeared that Tilo had never expected in his life: houses. Small houses, crooked, made of wood, cardboard, and paper. Some had roof tiles made of gift ribbon. Some windows were made of transparent cellophane. A lantern hung from a beam—a real lantern, but without magic, just a small, frosty blue glow.

It was a city.

Built from gifts.

Built from things nobody got.

Tilo stopped and felt his stomach briefly try to become both sad and angry at the same time, which is a very unpleasant feeling because it has no clear direction.

"That's... wrong," he whispered.

Klirr nodded. "Yes."

"Who builds something like that?" asked Tilo.

Siv took a step forward, her gaze alert, her hand on the rope. "Nobody builds this intentionally," she said. "It just happens. Like mold. Only prettier."

"Nice grey horse," Tilo murmured.

Rubin snorted, as if he had heard the sentence and found it inappropriate.

They went inside.

The snow beneath their feet was different here. It didn't crunch. It muffled. As if it swallowed sounds so no one would notice anyone walking here. Between the houses lay packages, unopened, half-buried in the snow. Some were ripped open, and out of them spilled not contents, but... things that looked like ideas: a tiny spark of courage, a touch of warmth, a letter no one had read.

Tilo stopped in front of a package with a name on it. Not a child's name. An adult's name. And underneath: "For the moment you stop forbidding yourself everything."

Tilo swallowed. "This is... eerie."

"Gifts sometimes know more than people," said Siv.

"That's exactly the problem," Klirr muttered.

They passed a square in the middle of the small town. There stood a tree. Not a heart-shaped tree. An ordinary tree—or what an ordinary tree could be here. It was made of wooden sticks tied together, decorated with scraps of ribbon, and small packages hung from its branches, swaying gently in the mist.

"This is... like a cemetery," Tilo whispered.

Klirr looked at him. "No," she said. "A camp."

"A warehouse for... feelings," said Tilo.

"Feelings are also material," said Klirr.

Rubin's nose glowed brighter, and suddenly Tilo felt that humming again, very faint. Not as strong as on the North Sea coast. But there it was. A backward beat that likes to spread in quiet places because no one contradicts it there.

Siv stopped, her ear slightly tilted, as if she were hearing ice again. "There's someone here," she said.

Tilo felt himself getting cold. "Who?"

Siv pointed to a road made of cardboard panels that ran between two crooked houses. Something was moving there.

Not a human being.

Something small.

Mechanical.

A nutcracker.

And another one behind him.

And another one.

They didn't walk stiffly like wind-up toys. They walked purposefully, as if they were following orders, as if they were going through the motions of a routine. Their lanterns glowed coldly.

"Guardian," Klirr murmured.

Tilo swallowed. "How did they get here?"

Klirr gazed into the fog. "Because someone sent her," she said.

"Malrik is gone," Tilo said quickly, because he needed to hear the sentence to believe it. "He fell into the sea."

Klirr looked at him. "People aren't the only ones who leave plans behind," she said.

Rubin snorted. His nose glowed, and for a moment the light was so intense it pushed back the fog. Tilo peered deeper into the city, further back where the houses stood closer together. There, in the shadows, was something that wasn't built of gifts.

An opening in the ground.

A hole, like a cellar entrance, with stairs made of ice.

And the humming came from that hole.

Not loud.

But definitely.

"This is... an entrance," Tilo whispered.

Siv nodded. "And the city is just the anteroom," she said.

A clattering sound filled the air. "Then this is no coincidence," she said.

"Then what?" asked Tilo.

Klirr looked at the nutcrackers, at the hole, at Rubin, whose nose glowed like a warning light in a dream. "Then this," she said softly, "is a storage place for everything that wasn't allowed to arrive. And someone is collecting it."

Tilo felt the soot whisper in his head: Then it will be too late. Then Malrik was only the beginning.

He reached for the bell.

It rang once.

The sound was subtle, but it was there. Clear.

“Then we’ll take back what’s ours,” said Tilo, and he was surprised at how firm his voice sounded.

Siv grinned briefly. "That almost sounds like a hunting name," she said.

Klirr nodded. "Let's go then," she said.

They walked towards the hole.

And behind them, in the silent alleys of the city made of forgotten packages, the mechanical guardians began to move, as if the city itself had just woken up.

Stairs made of ice are a bad idea when you're in a place that's already been built with bad ideas.

They didn't creak. They didn't make a sound. They were simply... cold. And every step felt like delving deeper into a decision that could never be undone.

Rubin didn't go downstairs. The reindeer stayed above, held by Karr, who kept his hand reassuringly on the halter, as if he needed not only to restrain Rubin but also to comfort him. Rubin's nose continued to glow, and the light fell like a slanted spotlight into the cellar entrance, as if saying: I'll shine as far as I can. You'll have to see the rest for yourselves.

Klirr went ahead, because Klirr was always better at the front than at the back. Siv followed her, quietly, with that catlike calm. Tilo came after, the bell in his hand, and behind him two guards whose breath looked like little ghosts in the cold shaft.

"If I die now," Tilo whispered, "I want someone to quote my last words correctly."

"You will not die," said Klirr.

"That's no guarantee," Tilo muttered.

“No,” said Klirr. “This is an order.”

The staircase ended in a corridor. Not made of stone like the ice mine Fenna had described—this corridor was different. It was made of wood, but old, dark wood that didn't smell of a workshop, but of a cellar. Of forgotten things. Of the smell of drawers you never open because you suspect what's inside.

And there were presents everywhere.

Not tidy. Not packaged. They lay stacked, tilted, in nooks. Some were open, and out of them spilled not toys, but... things that don't fit in your hands. A soft, warm glow. A small sound, as if someone were laughing softly. A tiny breeze that smelled of spring, which was utterly outrageous down here.

“This is...”, began one of the guards.

"Don't touch it," Klirr said immediately.

"Why not?" whispered Tilo.

Siv looked around. "Because this isn't just a warehouse," she said. "This is... bait."

Tilo swallowed. He'd already heard the sentence down in the ice mine. Bait. It was as if this night was speaking the same language everywhere.

The humming of the wrong rhythm was clearly present. Not so strong as to immediately drive you crazy, but strong enough to intrude on the pauses between your thoughts. It turned every breath into a subtle reproach.

Why are you here? Why are you doing this? Why you? You are not important. You are right to be afraid.

Tilo felt the sentences begin to form within him, as if they had always been waiting there. He lifted the bell and rang it, not loudly, just regularly. A small, clear note. Like a metronome against a false beat.

Siv nodded briefly. "Good," she said.

Klirr stopped and bent down to a stack of packages. One of them read: "For the one who is always late."

Tilo blinked. "That's mean."

"That's precise," said Klirr. "And precision is dangerous when it comes from someone who doesn't know you, but still manages to hit you."

They continued walking. The passage led deeper, and the city above seemed further away with every step. The light from Rubin dwindled until only the small frost lanterns on the walls cast a bluish glow. Not a cozy light. It was the light of places that don't want you to stay.

Then they heard the click.

Not at the front.

Behind them.

Tilo turned around and saw it: The first nutcracker had come down the stairs. Then a second. Then a third. Their lanterns glowed coldly, and there was no aggression in their glass eyes. Only command. That was worse.

"Guardian," whispered a guard.

"Of course," Tilo murmured. "Of course they're coming now. It's just the kind of evening we're having."

Klirr slowly turned around. "Stop," she said.

The frontmost nutcracker stopped. The clicking ceased. As if it had obeyed.

"Good," Tilo murmured. "You can hear."

Klirr stepped closer. "Who sent you?" she asked.

The nutcracker tilted its head, creaking, and its voice sounded like wood that had learned a sentence.

"Order."

Siv almost spat on the floor. "Always that word," she growled.

"Malrik is gone," said Tilo.

The nutcracker didn't respond to "Malrik". It only responded to "Order". As if that word were a key, and all other concepts were just sounds.

"Order," repeated the Nutcracker.

Klirr nodded slowly. "And what is order down here?" she asked.

The nutcracker lifted the lantern slightly, and the cold glow flickered. A whiff of soot drifted through the corridor, as if someone were squeezing air out of an invisible sack.

"Collection," said the Nutcracker.

"Collection of what?" Tilo asked, and his voice now sounded not just nervous, but angry, because he suddenly understood that things had been stolen down here that could not be reclaimed because nobody knew they were missing.

The nutcracker slowly turned his head towards the stack of presents. "Not received," he said.

Klirr briefly closed her eyes. "Damn," she murmured.

Siv looked at Tilo. "Someone is collecting the misdeliveries," she whispered. "The lost things. The forgotten wishes."

"Why?" asked Tilo.

The question was dangerous because "why" is always an opening. Soot loves "why." Why does it do that? Why does that happen? Why you? And then comes the sentence: Because it's your fault.

Tilo rang the bell, harder. The sound cut through the corridor, and the soot receded slightly, as if it had been burned.

"Not why," said Klirr. "Where."

She turned back to face forward. "We need to figure out where this is going."



The nutcrackers started moving again. Not quickly, not running, but they were coming. Their steps clacked in a rhythm that wasn't their own.

"They won't let us here," said a guard.

"Then we won't let them do it," said Siv.

She pulled out a knife, not large, but sharp. Klirr raised his hand. "No fighting unless necessary," she said.

Siv looked at her. "And if it's necessary?"

Klirr looked at the nutcrackers. "Then we fight in such a way that we don't feed what drives them," she said quietly. "No anger. No guilt. No 'being right' statements. Just... movement."

Tilo stared at her. "Since when does Klirr sound like Alva?"

Klirr glanced at him. "Since I realized that hard work alone isn't enough when someone else is trying to take control of your mind."

That was new. And it was unsettling because it meant: even clattering could be felt.

They didn't run. They walked quickly. The corridor narrowed, curved, and then they saw it: a door.

Not made of wood. Of icy frost. Lines were etched into the door, star points, a pattern reminiscent of the Heart of Snow – only reversed. As if someone had taken the song and sung it backwards.

Tilo felt his stomach twitch. "This is... the wrong rhythm."

"Yes," said Klirr.

Siv placed her hand on the door, then pulled it back as if she had burned herself. "Cold on purpose," she murmured.

Behind them, the nutcrackers clicked closer.

Tilo lifted the bell. The sound was now no longer just a noise, but a tool.

"If Fenna were here," he whispered.

"She is not here," said Klirr.

"Then it's us," said Tilo, and he was surprised himself that he could say that without laughing.

Klirr nodded. "Then we'll open it," she said.

Siv stepped back. Klirr stepped forward. Tilo stood beside her, the bell in his hand, and felt the buzzing in his head intensify as the door noticed her.

The nutcrackers were now only a few steps away.

Klirr placed his hand on the door.

"Now," she whispered.

Tilo rang the doorbell.

The sound echoed, clear and sharp.

The lines in the door flickered.

And for a moment, just for a moment, the incorrect beat felt as if it had briefly stuttered.

The door gave way.

Not with a bang.

With a sigh.

It was as if she had been waiting a long time for someone to contradict her.

There was no room behind the door.

It was a state of affairs.

The air inside wasn't colder, but it felt more opinionated. As if it were judging you before you'd even properly entered. The light from the frost lanterns on the walls grew fainter, as if it didn't want to come in. And yet, something drew on them—something that didn't extinguish light, but rather inverted it.

Tilo was the last to walk through the door and immediately felt the off-beat rhythm grip his ribs. Not brutally. Persuasively. Like a salesperson who knows you're tired.

Siv went ahead. Clang right behind him. The guards were silent because they understood that down here, words could become food.

The corridor led into a hall so large it couldn't possibly be a basement. The ceiling and walls disappeared into darkness, but enough could be seen to know: this is no ordinary place. This is a storage room.

Shelves stood there, as tall as trees, built from wooden slats, gift ribbons, and scrap metal. And on these shelves lay not packages—not just packages. There lay things one doesn't wrap. Memories. Hopes. Small, warm thoughts one wanted to forget because they hurt when needed.

One shelf was full of letters, unopened, all addressed to "Someone." Another shelf held small jars containing a faint chuckle that had never reached a room. Yet another had only a row of tiny, gray stones—each stone feeling like "Disappointment."

Tilo stopped and felt his throat tighten. "That's..." he whispered.

“The city,” Klirr said softly. “Only... inside.”

Siv moved on, her eyes sharp, as if searching through this jumble for a trace that wasn't made of snow. "There's someone here," she said again. "And this time... not made of wood."

Tilo heard it now too: a soft rustling, as if many pages of paper were turning over at once. Not from wind. From hands.

They followed the sound, between the shelves, and came to a circle in the middle of the hall. There, the floor was covered in icy frost, like a seal. A pattern resembling heart-shaped snow – only twisted, backward, folded.

And at the center of this pattern was a figure.

Not Malrik.

Not human.

It was... difficult to describe because it didn't really have a body. It looked like a cloak of shadows, in which you could sometimes make out shapes: a hand that never gets warm; a mouth that always wants to say "right"; eyes that don't see, but compare.

Hidden in the shadows were things like pins: labels, incorrectly affixed. Small watches without hands. A piece of charred tape. Splinters. Malrik's tools – like trophies.

And around the figure stood nutcrackers, silent, like an army waiting for just one word.

“This is...”, Tilo began.

Klirr said it first, and her voice was so flat that it barely sounded fearful. "Order," she said.

The figure raised its head – or what passed for a head here. A shadow turned towards them. The rustling stopped.

Then she spoke.

Not loud.

Not even in words that can be properly heard.

It was more of a thought that suddenly lay in the room, heavy as snow.

"Not arrived."

Tilo felt his stomach go cold. The sentence didn't feel like information. It felt like guilt.

“We'll take them with us,” said Siv, and her voice was surprisingly firm.

The figure didn't respond to "we." It responded to "take." The rustling started again, faster, more impatiently.

"Collection," said the figure.

And in that word lay: possession. Order. Control.

Klirr took a step forward. "These things belong to no one," she said.

The figure turned slightly. "Wrong," it came, this time more clearly. "Heard... not arrived. Heard... not deserved."

Tilo felt the soot in his head immediately rejoice. Undeserved. Yes. Exactly. Some people never get what they deserve. You have every right to be angry.

He lifted the bell and rang it.

The tone was clear, like a nail in a sentence. The jubilation in his head faltered.

Siv glanced at him briefly, nodded curtly, as if she had just understood that Tilo wasn't just a scaredy-cat. He was a tool keeper.

Klirr held her hands open, as if to show: I have no weapon. "Who are you?" she asked.

The figure swayed, as if "Who" were an inappropriate word. Then came the answer, and it sounded not like a name, but like a rule:

"Balance sheet."

Tilo swallowed. "What?"

"Balance sheet," the figure repeated, and something that looked like numbers flickered briefly in the shadows.

Klirr exhaled. "You are... what emerges when you count everything."

"Count," said the figure. "Count... what's missing. Count... what's wrong. Count... what hasn't arrived."

Siv spat softly on the floor. "That's sick," she muttered.

Bilanz raised a hand from the shadows. The nutcrackers clicked simultaneously, as if a rhythm had started within them.

Tilo felt the buzzing in his head growing louder. Not just a bad rhythm. A rhythm of calculation. A constant weighing up: Who has earned what? Who has received what? Who has lost what?

"It's calculating," Tilo whispered.

Klirr nodded. "And Malrik gave him numbers."

Bilanz whispered: "Proof."

And suddenly Tilo saw a shelf open at the edge of the circle. Not with a door, but with a crack. Something emerged from it: a package. Large. Heavy. With a black ribbon.

It had a name.

Not just any one.

Tilo recognized him because he had thought of him many times that night.

Santa Claus.

Tilo felt his heart flutter.

"What is that?" whispered Siv.

Klirr became very quiet. "This," she said slowly, "is a gift that must never arrive."

The balance sheet tilted its head. "Undeserved," it said.

Tilo felt anger rising within him. Did Santa Claus not deserve it? After everything he does? After everything he wears?

The soot rejoiced: Yes! Rage! Justice!

Tilo rang the bell. Once. Hard.

The sound crashed into the hall like a small hammer.

"You can't decide what's deserved," Tilo said, his voice no longer trembling. "You can only count. And counting isn't a judgment. It's just... mathematics."

The balance sheet fluctuated. The word "mathematics" seemed to irritate it, as if it hadn't expected someone to strip it of its dignity by trivializing it.

Klirr stepped next to Tilo. "We're not taking the package," she said, loudly enough that it sounded like a cut through the hall.

Siv stared at her. "Why not?"

Klirr didn't look at Siv. She looked at Bilanz. "Because that's how it tries to lure us," she said. "With anger. With guilt. With the feeling that we have to save someone who isn't even here."

Tilo swallowed hard. He wanted to take the package. Not because he was greedy. Because he was loyal. Loyalty is a wonderful catch.

Bilanz whispered: "Proof."

The Nutcrackers took a step forward.

Siv raised her knife. Klirr raised her hand. "No," she said.

"Then what?" hissed Siv.

Tilo felt the bell in his hand. Fenna had said down in the ice mine: The real truth isn't flattering. And here, everything was flattering: the package, the anger, the guilt.

So he had to do something that wasn't flattering.

He stepped forward, to the edge of the circle, and looked into the shadowy eyes of the balance sheet.

"You want to collect," said Tilo. "Good. Collect this."

He raised the bell.

And didn't hold it up like a weapon.

He held it out like a bill.

"Here," Tilo said quietly. "This is my 'being right.' This is my anger. Take it. If you want it. But then—" He swallowed because the sentence hurt. "—then walk away from the gifts. Because they don't belong to you. They belong to the attempt."

The balance sheet fluctuated as if it hadn't expected anyone to voluntarily offer their weapon.

The rustling in the hall became faster.

The nutcrackers clicked nervously.

Klirr whispered: "Tilo..."

Tilo didn't ring the doorbell.

He waited.

And for a heartbeat, there was something in the shadows that felt almost like... curiosity.

The balance sheet leaned forward.

The air was deliberately made cold.

And Tilo knew: It was about to be decided whether the sound of the bell was just a tool – or a key.

## Final takeoff clearance

At the North Pole, "launch clearance" is a word that usually sounds like glitter.

Today it sounded like wood splinters, wet gloves, and people who had believed in something for too long to give up now.

The Polarhof was still standing. That was something of a miracle, albeit one made of tarpaulins, tension rings, and sheer defiance. The dome was patched up like an old boiler that's been repaired too many times to ever need rebuilding. The crack hadn't disappeared—it had merely been tamed. It glittered in the frosty light like a scar that refuses to be beautiful.

The heart-shaped tree hummed more steadily again. Not joyfully. More like vigilantly. As if it were checking every note in the factory to see if it tasted of soot.

Santa Claus stood in the sleigh yard, and from behind, you might have thought he was simply a man looking at his sleigh. But as you got closer, you realized: he wasn't looking at the sleigh. He was looking at the world, as best he could.

Marei was there, pale, her hair swept back from her face, the star compass clutched in her hand like a fragile truth. Alva sat on a box, murmuring softly, no longer continuously, but ready to sing the old song again at any moment. Klirr stood beside Santa Claus, her arms folded as if she could hold the air with them.

And Fenna... Fenna hadn't returned yet.

That was the problem.

You can start many things. Machines. Sleds. Plans. But you can't start if part of history is still frozen in ice and the world pretends it doesn't matter.

"How long?" asked Klirr.

Santa Claus didn't answer immediately. He looked at the core of the sleigh, glowing inside its casing, not as brightly as usual, but steadily. The light wasn't cheerful. It was duty.

"For as long as necessary," he finally said.

Klirr nodded. "That's not a time indication."

"No," he said. "That's an attitude."

Klirr sighed, and with Klirr, that was almost a prayer.

Tilo was there too. He had returned later, with Rubin, wind in his bones, and a face that looked as if he had stored the North Sea within him. The bell hung from his belt like an award no one would officially bestow, because no one wants to officially explain why a small bell is holding the world together.

He stood slightly apart because he didn't know where to stand when you see a man disappear into the sea and are still not sure if the man is really gone.

Siv was there, still in fur, still with that look that reads tracks even when there are none. Karr was tending to Rubin, speaking softly to him, as if explaining to the reindeer that light doesn't always have to be kind to be important.

Then a runner came along.

Not panicking. That was new. He was running, but he was running with a face that was more determined than desperate.

"Clink!" he shouted. "We have a problem. And a solution. Maybe."

Klirr turned to him. "Speak."

The runner breathed a sigh of relief. "A signal has come from the city of forgotten gifts."

Santa Claus raised his head.

Tilo felt his stomach go cold again for a moment. City of forgotten gifts. He thought of fog, of nutcrackers, of the word balance sheet, which sounds like a judgment.

"What kind of signal?" Klirr asked.

The runner swallowed. "A tone. A bell. And... Rubin reacted. He raised his head and... his nose became lighter, as if it recognized the tone."

Tilo instinctively reached for his own bell.

Alva lifted her head, her eyes suddenly clear. "That's Fenna," she whispered.

Marei blinked. "Or someone who has learned what Fenna sounds like."

Klirr nodded slowly. "Both are possible," she said.

Santa Claus took a step forward. "Can the sound come here?" he asked.

The runner shook his head. "Only in waves. It's... weak. But it's there."

Alva stood up, with difficulty, as if her body, after this night, no longer believed that legs were a good idea. "Then she's fighting," she said softly. "And keeping the beat. Otherwise, there wouldn't be any sound."

Klirr looked at the sled. "Then we won't start," she said.

Santa Claus looked at her. "Clink," he said calmly.

"We won't start without Fenna," Klirr repeated. Her voice was harsh, but underneath it was something rarely heard from her: fear that didn't sound like soot, but like responsibility.



Marei stepped closer. "We don't have enough time," she said. "The lines are stable, but thin. The dome is patched, but not healed. If we wait too long, we won't even have launch clearance. Just... a hole in the sky."

Klirr narrowed his eyes. "Then we'll send a team."

"Where to?" asked Siv.

Klirr looked at Tilo.

Tilo raised his hands. "No," he said immediately.

"Yes," said Klirr.

"I was just out on the sea and—"

"And you survived," said Klirr. "You're now officially in the 'useful' category."

Tilo groaned. "This is a curse, isn't it?"

Santa Claus approached Tilo. His voice was quiet, so only Tilo could hear it, but the words still hit home with a weight. "You carried the bell when you were afraid," he said. "That's rare. And that's why... I need you."

Tilo swallowed. "That's a very polite way of sending me."

Santa Claus smiled briefly, not broadly, but warmly enough to irritate the soot in the air. "Politeness is just another way of saying 'please,'" he said.

Klirr looked at Siv. "You're coming with me," she said.

Siv nodded as if it were a matter of course.

"Karr," said Klirr.

Karr grunted. "I'm sticking with Rubin."

"Rubin is coming along," said Klirr.

Karr froze. "What?"

Klirr looked at him. "When Fenna is down, we need light," she said. "Not just for eyes. For rhythm. Rubin broke Malrik's humming by the sea. He can do it again."

Karr looked at Rubin, and in his gaze was a worry, the kind you usually only see in people who love something without admitting it.

Rubin snorted, as if he had already agreed, because reindeer logic is sometimes faster than human discussion.

Marei stepped forward. "And the sled?" she asked.

Santa Claus looked at his sleigh. Then he looked at the yard, the boxes, the faces. "We're preparing to depart," he said. "We're getting into position. And when they return—"

He paused, and the pause was a promise.

—then we'll fly. No matter how thin the air is.

Alva murmured the old song more quietly, and the heart tree answered with a calmer hum, as if saying: Good. One direction.

Klirr nodded once. "Then that's the final takeoff clearance," she said.

Tilo looked at her. "Last one?"

Klirr looked up at the dome, at the scar in the glass. "If we don't manage it now," she said, "there is no 'later' anymore. Only... sometime."

Siv pulled her coat tighter. "Then we'll go," she said.

Tilo looked at his bell. Then at Rubin. Then at Santa Claus, who stood there like someone who hadn't learned to let go because he'd never been allowed to.

"Okay," Tilo said quietly. "Then we'll get them."

And while the workshop began to hum again – this time in the right rhythm, as best as possible – a small group prepared to go into the fog, to the city built from forgotten things.

Outside, the dome creaked.

And inside, preparations were underway for the start, as if strapping a dream onto a sled.

The path to the city of forgotten gifts was shorter if you knew where not to look.

This sounds like advice from a cheap adventure novel, but at the North Pole, "not looking" was often the wisest form of courage. You walk through fog that reeks of guilt and pretend it's just the weather. You ignore the places where the ice whispers and focus on the ones that are simply cold.

Tilo, Siv, and Karr walked in front. Rubin trotted between them, his harness loose, his nose glowing like a small lantern that had decided not to be proud, but useful. Two guards followed, but not Klirr—Klirr had stayed behind because someone at the factory had to keep order. Marei had given them the star compass, but not with pleasure. More like handing someone a knife and saying, "Please don't cut yourself."

"This is no walk in the park," Tilo muttered as the fog thickened.

"This is a walk in the park," said Siv. "Only without the fun."

"That's... a matter of definition," Tilo gasped.

Karr walked in silence, but you could see the tension in his shoulders. He had found Rubin again by the sea, and now he was carrying him into yet another danger. Stable elves aren't sentimental; they're practical. But practical doesn't mean unfeeling. Practical simply means that feelings are transformed into work until they're manageable.

Rubin snorted, and his nose briefly glowed brighter, as if telling the fog: You're not the boss.

The fog reacted, receding slightly. Not much. But enough for Tilo to see the outline of the city again, those crooked little houses made of wrapping paper and ribbon, the lanterns with their frosty light. This time it didn't feel like a discovery, but like a waiting.

"She knows we're coming," Tilo whispered.

"Places know nothing," said Karr.

"Places sometimes know more than people," Siv murmured.

That was the second version of that sentence that Tilo heard, and he didn't like either of them.

They went inside, and immediately the air felt different. Thicker, quieter. As if the fog in here wasn't just hanging there, but listening.

The packages were scattered everywhere again, just like before. Names, sentences, small, precise stitches. Tilo let his gaze wander over them without reading. Reading was a dangerous activity here. Reading means absorbing. And down here, you don't want to absorb anything that will later work inside you.

Rubin's nose glowed, and the light pushed back the fog, revealing the street leading to the cellar stairs. The entrance in the floor was still there, but it looked... more open now. As if someone had opened the door further downstairs.

"I don't like that," said Siv.

"Me neither," said Tilo. "And I'm an expert at disliking things."

Karr led Rubin to the stairs. Rubin hesitated briefly, then went. The reindeer was wiser than many people: it knew that fear wasn't a stop sign, but a warning. And warnings can be heeded without obeying them.

Down in the corridor it was even quieter. The packages were stacked up, the humming was louder, but this time there was something new in it: a thin, clear tone, like a bell ringing through dirt.

Tilo stopped. "That's her," he whispered.

"Or someone who imitates them," Siv said.

"Then we'll find out who," Karr growled, and his growl was not aggressive, but... determined.

They continued walking towards the frost door.

The door was half open, as if it encountered less resistance this time. Or as if it had learned that resistance only breaks doors.

As they entered the hall beyond, Tilo immediately noticed the difference: The humming was denser. The rustling was there. And in the middle of the hall, in a circle of frosted ice, stood Bilanz.

Or what the balance sheet represented: a coat of shadows, pins of labels, clocks, burnt ribbon. Nutcrackers stood all around. But something was different than before.

The balance sheet was not the only factor.

Fenna stood at the edge of the circle.

She looked as if she hadn't just entered the place, but had wrestled with it. Her coat was torn. Her cheeks were pale. But her eyes were alert, and in her hand she held the bell that Tilo had been holding in the shadows just moments before. She didn't ring it constantly. She simply held it, as if it were a piece of order unrelated to accounting.

And directly in front of her on the floor lay something that Tilo didn't want to see because it smelled too much like Malrik:

A black splinter.

Not the same one as in the ice mine, Tilo thought. That one had been put back. This one was... new. Or made of something else. Thinner. Sharper. More like a nail than a stone.

Fenna lifted her head when she saw them, and there was relief in her eyes – but not the soft kind, rather the hard kind that says: Good. Now we can continue.

“Tilo,” she said hoarsely.

"Fenna," gasped Tilo. "You're alive!"

"This is currently my favorite state," Fenna murmured.

Siv raised her hand, stopping the guards. Karr led Rubin forward. Rubin's nose glowed, and the light fell on Bilanz, and for a moment the shadow cloak flickered as if it disliked the light but couldn't ignore it either.

Bilanz whispered: "Back."

Fenna shook her head. "No," she said.

Bilanz whispered: “Not arrived.”

“Yes,” said Fenna, her voice surprisingly calm. “We have arrived.”

Tilo sensed the effect of the sentence in the room. As if a lock had clicked briefly.

The balance sheet fluctuated. The rustling grew faster.

"You're late," Fenna said to Tilo, without taking her eyes off the balance sheet.

"I tried to be faster," Tilo gasped.

"Next time... try to die less," Fenna murmured.

That was Fenna. Dry. Honest. And precisely for that reason, reassuring.

Siv stepped next to Fenna. "What is that?" she asked, looking at the splinter.

Fenna swallowed. "A residue," she said. "A remnant. When Malrik... was gone, not only was there nothing left. There was... a pattern. Bilanz took it. And now..." She exhaled. "Now it's trying to build something from it."

Karr growled. "Where is Malrik?"

Fenna glanced at them briefly. "In the sea," she said softly. "Or in something that's bigger than the sea now."

Bilanz whispered: "Guilt."

The sentence hit Tilo like a stab in the heart, because he immediately thought of the moment Malrik pulled his hand back and fell. Could they have saved him? Did they fail? Did they stand by and watch?

The soot in his head rejoiced: Yes. Guilt. Justice. You should have—

Rubin snorted.

The nose glowed brighter.

The humming sound in my head stumbled, as if the light had just found a timing error.

Fenna lifted the bell and rang it once, clearly.

The guilt in Tilo's mind receded as if someone had opened a window.

"Good," whispered Fenna. "Rubin will help."

Bilanz raised a shadowy hand. The nutcrackers clicked and took a step forward.

Siv pulled out the knife. Fenna raised her hand. "No," she said.

Siv growled. "Then what?"

Fenna looked at the circle, at the splinter, at the balance sheet. "We're doing what it hates," she said quietly. "We're giving back."

Tilo swallowed. "Return it? To whom?"

Fenna looked at the shelves. "To the experiment," she said. "To the world. To people who never knew they were missing something."

The balance sheet whispered: "Not deserved."

Fenna smiled briefly, harshly. "This is not your decision," she said.

Rubin's nose glowed, and the light struck the splinter on the ground. The black nail shimmered as if it were writhing.

Fenna took a step forward, did not pick up the shard, but placed her hand next to it, just above the frost circle.

"Listen," she said softly. "We're starting. The sled is starting. But not with perfect magic. With magic that knows it isn't perfect. And you—" She looked at Bilanz. "—you won't be flying with us."

The balance sheet fluctuated.

The rustling grew more furious. The nutcrackers clicked faster.

And somewhere in the hall, on a shelf, a package began to glow, as if it had heard the words "we're starting" and was saying: Finally.

Tilo felt the moment contract. A knot of time.

Fenna glanced at him briefly, for just a heartbeat. "When you ring the doorbell," she whispered, "don't ring against the balance sheet. Ring for us."

Tilo nodded, holding the bell in his hand.

Siv made himself available.

Karr held Rubin tight.

And Bilanz raised both shadowy hands, as if closing an account.

Closing a bill is harmless when it comes to numbers.

When it comes to people, it's usually murder with good bookkeeping.

Bilanz raised his shadowy hands, and the rustling in the hall swelled as if a thousand pages of paper were simultaneously saying: Now. Now. Now. The nutcrackers clicked in a rhythm that didn't march, but counted. One. Two. Three. Error. Misdelivery. Misstep.

Tilo felt his mind want to start counting. How many mistakes had he made? How many wrong decisions? How many seconds too late? The soot loved numbers because numbers seem so objective when you fill them with guilt.

Rubin snorted, and the light from the red nose wasn't just light this time. It was direction. It was a warm "no".

Fenna stood at the edge of the frost circle, her hand just above the black shard, keeping the rhythm in her chest, as Alva had taught her. Long. Short. Long. Pause. Long. Not fast. Not frantic. Not even combative. Simply... persistent.

Siv held the knife in her hand, but she kept it down. For Siv, this was almost a religious discipline: being ready without immediately cutting.

Karr held Rubin so tightly, as if a stable elf could protect a reindeer from metaphysical accounting. Perhaps he could.

Bilanz whispered: "Equilibrium."

And suddenly, a thin line of black light shot upwards from the frost circle, as if the splinter on the ground were throwing a thread. The thread struck the shelf of letters, then a shelf of jars full of giggles, then one of gray stones. With each strike, something twitched—not visible like a flash of lightning, but palpable like a cold stab in the heart.

Tilo felt images flash through his mind: children who had never received a present. Adults who had never asked for help. A man who always smiled, even though he was tired.

It was not comfort. It was an indictment.

The balance sheet mattered.

"That's a net," whispered Siv.

"It pulls things together," Tilo gasped.

"It doesn't pull them together," Fenna said hoarsely. "It pulls them away."

Klirr had said: Feelings are material. And Bilanz was in the process of subtracting material. Not because it was laughing evilly, but because it called it "order".

Tilo lifted the bell. His hand was trembling.

Fenna had said: Ring the bell for us.

Not against the balance sheet.

That meant: don't ring the doorbell in anger. Don't ring in guilt. Don't shout "it's your fault!" But rather... in a certain direction.

Tilo exhaled, and in that breath came a thought that didn't feel good, but was correct:

I'm not perfect. I'm not important. I'm still here.

He rang the doorbell.

Once. For a long time.

The tone was clear. Not loud, but resonant. It didn't seem to fly towards a balance sheet, but rather to fall into the room, like a stone into a still pond.

And the room responded.

Not a balance sheet.

The hall.

The shelves.

The packages.

The attempt.

A faint shimmering passed through the collected objects, as if someone had allowed them to breathe again.

The balance sheet fluctuated as if it had just lost a number.

Fenna lifted the second bell – hers – and rang it as well. Briefly. Faster. As if she were picking up Tilo's sound and turning it into a rhythm.

Long. Short. Long. Pause. Long.

Rubin's nose glowed, and the light began to pulse in that rhythm. Not because Rubin was a metronome, but because Rubin had apparently understood: This is a song, and songs carry animals better than commands.

The nutcrackers clicked – and stopped.

Some suddenly stopped, as if they had forgotten how many steps were left.

Bilanz whispered, this time more sharply: "Mistakes."

And the shadow thread twitched, pulled harder, as if the balance sheet were trying to tighten the net.

A shelf groaned. A package slid off the edge, didn't fall, but... hovered briefly, as if it couldn't decide whether it could still be a gift.

Fenna swallowed, her forehead damp with exertion. "Now," she whispered.

Siv understood immediately. She didn't jump into the net. She jumped into the gap.

She didn't run directly towards Bilanz. She ran to one of the black threads, where it ran across the floor, and cut it not in anger, but precisely, like cutting a rope that pulls a boat to shore.

Her knife hit the thread.

There was no sound.



But the room jerked as if someone had briefly cut off its air supply.

Bilanz uttered a sound that was not a scream, but an expression of: This is not fair.

Tilo felt his mind immediately want to say: Yes. It's fair. You're right—

Instead, he rang the doorbell again, just once, briefly. For us.

The sound held him captive.

Fenna rang again, keeping the rhythm. Rubin pulsed. Karr held Rubin as if he were leashing the light.

Siv cut the second thread.

The network flickered. A shelf of letters began to glow, and the envelopes trembled as if they finally wanted to be read.

Bilanz raised his hands higher. Shadows spilled from the threads, thickened, and for a moment it looked as if Bilanz were building a body: shoulders of labels, a head of watches, a mouth of burnt tape.

“Not... deserved,” it whispered, and this time there was hatred in the whisper. Not Malrik’s hatred. Colder. More calculating.

Fenna looked up. "Earning is one thing," she said hoarsely. "And you're just a spreadsheet."

That was a mean-spirited remark because it belittled Bilanz. But it wasn't flattering. It diminished it. And small things lose their power when they aren't revered.

The balance sheet fluctuated.

That was the opening.

Siv jumped into the circle – not to kill Bilanz, but to reach the shard. She wanted to push it away, throw it away, anything. Fenna grabbed her arm.

“No!” Fenna shouted.

Siv froze. "Why?!"

"Because then it's open again!" Fenna gasped. "The splinter is an anchor. If you take it out, everything flies around. The balance will be—"

“—redistribute themselves,” Tilo whispered.

Fenna nodded, breathless. "Exactly."

Siv growled, but she held on. The knife trembled in her hand because sometimes doing nothing is harder than cutting.

Bilanz seized the moment.

The shadow cloak arched, and a new thread shot out – not towards a shelf, but towards Tilo.

The thread didn't hit him physically. It hit him in the head.

And suddenly Tilo was standing on the shores of the North Sea again. He saw Malrik pull his hand back. He heard the water swallowing him. He heard his own voice: No. And then he heard another sentence, one he hadn't said, but which felt as if he had always thought it:

You are to blame.

Tilo gasped. The bell almost slipped from his hand.

The soot rejoiced. Finally. Finally, proof. Finally, a bill.

Fenna looked at him, and there was no panic in her gaze. Only urgency. "Tilo," she said quietly. "No arguing. Ring the bell."

Tilo lifted the bell with both hands, as if it had suddenly become heavy as a stone. His head was full of images, full of numbers, full of "what ifs." But he felt Rubin, that rhythmic pulse. Long. Short. Long.

He rang the doorbell.

Once.

And there was no resistance in that tone.

Just the sober admission: Yes. I was there. Yes. It hurts. And no. I'm not giving up.

The thread twitched.

The balance sheet fluctuated as if it had just lost a number it desperately wanted to keep.

Siv cut the third thread.

The network tore in several places. Shelves flickered. Packages glowed. Letters rustled like a storm of paper.

Bilanz took a step back—or what passes for a step in the shadows. The circle of frost began to shimmer, not black, but clearer. As if the pattern were remembering how it was before the twist.

"Now!" Fenna shouted hoarsely.

Don't "cut".

Don't "fight".

"Now" in the sense of: keep the beat until it tips over.

Fenna rang the bell. Tilo rang the bell. Rubin pulsed. Karr whispered something soothing into the reindeer's ear, perhaps a stable song. Siv stood in a circle, the knife still, holding her hands as if she were holding her breath to prevent herself from succumbing to rage again.

Bilanz whispered: "Equilibrium."

And the frost circle answered.

Not with a scream.

With a soft click, like a lock finally falling back into the correct position.

The black splinter on the ground glowed briefly – and then it became dull, as if it were losing its meaning.

The balance sheet shrank, as if it suddenly realized that only shadows remained, devoid of meaning. The coat flickered, the labels fell like dead leaves, the clocks without hands clinked softly on the floor.

For a moment there was silence.

Then the balance sheet collapsed.

Not dead. Not gone.

More like... emptied.

Like an account book that you close because you've realized you can't count everything without overcounting everything.

Fenna stopped, panting, the bell in her hand. She looked at Tilo, and this time there was a tiny smile – not a Pratchettian "everything will be alright" smile, more like: We're still alive.

"We have to go back," she said hoarsely. "Now."

"Why?" gasped Siv.

Fenna looked up as if she could see the polar avenue through the earth and fog. "Because this... was just the final launch clearance," she said. "And the sky isn't waiting for us up there."

Tilo swallowed, lifted the bell to his belt as if it were a normal thing again.

"Then let's go," he said, and suddenly it didn't sound like a joke anymore.

This time they ran – not out of anger, but because of time. And behind them, the letters rustled on the shelves, as if they were finally beginning to belong in the world.

## The air is getting thin

There are nights when you sense that the heavens have made a decision.

Not against you, not for you, just... anything. And as soon as the heavens decide, the air changes. Thinner. Sharper. As if someone had filtered out all the comfort to make it more suitable for what's about to happen.

When Fenna, Tilo, Siv, and Karr emerged from the City of Forgotten Gifts with Rubin, the fog had changed. It wasn't gone, but it seemed less self-assured. As if it were suddenly just fog and no longer a judgment.

That was good.

That was also dangerous because "good" that night was only ever a brief respite before the next problem.

On the outskirts of the city stood a runner from the Polarhof, so out of breath it looked as if he had run through fear itself. "The dome," he gasped. "It... sings."

"What does that mean?" asked Fenna, and she hated herself for having to ask it.

The runner swallowed. "It's cracking in a pattern," he said. "Not chaotically. Like... like a watch about to jump."

Marei.

Fenna thought of Marei, standing up there, holding the sled's core like a fragile truth. The dome cracked like a clock. That wasn't a sound. That was a countdown.

"How long?" Siv asked.

The runner raised his hands, helpless. "Not for long," he said. "Klirr says: if you don't come now, you might... never come at all."

Tilo swallowed. "That's motivating in an unpleasant way."

"Let's go," said Fenna.

They weren't running heroically. They were running like people who know they're about to run out of breath. Rubin ran alongside, the reindeer surprisingly fast when he sees a reason to. His nose glowed in time with Fenna's pace, and this time the pace wasn't just to ward off soot. It was to ward off panic.

As they reached the Polar Courtyard, Fenna immediately saw that the runner hadn't exaggerated. The dome was indeed creaking in a pattern. It sounded like glass breathing—but backwards. A pull. A crack. A pause. Again. Rhythmic. Eerie.

Marei stood beneath the dome, staring upwards as if she could see the jump before it happened. Her lips moved as if she were counting numbers, or prayers, or both.

Alva was with her, her hands in the air as if holding invisible threads. She murmured the old song, but more quietly than before. Not because she was weak, but because she was listening to something. To the dome. To the tree. To the air.

Klirr stood at the edge of the sledding yard, not shouting orders. Klirr only shouted when there was something that could be solved with volume. Here, that wasn't possible. Here, nothing is solved. One balances.

Santa Claus was standing by the sleigh.

He wore the red coat, but he didn't look like a figure. He looked like someone who was just taking on the burden because no one else could carry it. His hands rested on the shaft, and the casing of the sled core glowed with a light that wasn't cheerful, but resolute.

As Fenna approached, he raised his gaze. And in that gaze lay not only relief. There was also something that Fenna had rarely seen in him:

Hurry.

Not hectic. Haste like a heavy animal that cannot be stopped.

"You're back," he said.

Fenna nodded, out of breath. "And I've brought something," she said, pointing at Rubin.

Rubin snorted, his nose briefly glowing brighter, as if he were saying: Yes. Here. Light.

Santa Claus approached Rubin, placed his hand on his neck, briefly, calmly. Then he looked back at Fenna. "And the balance sheet?" he asked softly.

Fenna swallowed. "Not gone," she said. "But... empty. Like a book that's been closed."

Santa Claus nodded. "Then it's no longer calculating," he said.

"Not active," Fenna said. "But... it could resurface if someone gives it numbers."

Klirr joined them. Her gaze swept over Fenna, Tilo, Siv, and Karr. "Good," she said. "You're alive."

"This is our greatest success today," Tilo murmured.

Klirr ignored him, which was her way of saying thank you.

Marei stepped closer, the star compass in her hand. Her eyes were red. "The air..." she said, swallowing as if the word were too dry. "The air is getting thin. The sled core is running steadily, but it's drawing energy from everything. From the tree. From the song. From us."

Fenna felt the truth of those words seep into her skin. When magic becomes thin, it grasps at what's available. And unfortunately, people are available.

"How much?" asked Fenna.

Marei shook her head. "Not in numbers," she said. "In... layers. Every minute, the air becomes a little less willing to support us."

Alva raised her head. "When the air gets thin," she whispered, "voices become important."

"And when voices become important," Fenna murmured, "soot becomes dangerous."

Alva nodded. "Yes."

Santa Claus looked up at the dome, and Fenna followed his gaze. The crack glittered. It had changed. It wasn't bigger, but... more active. As if the glass were making its own decisions from within.

"Cleared for takeoff," Klirr said suddenly.

The word didn't crackle. It fell. Heavily.

"Now?" asked Tilo.

"Now," said Klirr.

"But—" Marei began.

"We have Fenna," said Klirr. "We have Rubin. We have the song. We have enough to fly. Maybe not enough to wait."

Santa Claus nodded slowly. "Then," he said, his voice calm, but containing the whole night. "Then we'll be flying in thin air."

Alva murmured louder, the song rose, became more solemn. The heart tree responded with a hum that felt like a deep breath.

The reindeer were harnessed, even those who had already experienced too much. Rubin came to the front. His harness was put on, and Karr pulled it tight, as if he were securing not just an animal, but a hope.

Fenna stood beside the sled core, the bell in her hand. Tilo also held his bell, unsure whether to leave it hanging or use it, as if it were a life preserver of sound.

Siv stood ready, not as part of tradition, but as part of reality: someone to watch out when heaven is not in the mood.

Santa Claus climbed onto the sleigh.

He took the reins.

And the moment he closed his hands, the dome creaked again – this time louder. A crack flashed through the glass like lightning, not completely, but enough to make everyone hold their breath at once.

Marei whispered: "The air..."

"...is getting thin," Fenna finished, and she felt the soot trying to smile again somewhere in the spaces between the workshop.

Santa Claus looked up, and his voice wasn't loud, but it carried. "Keep the beat," he said. "Keep yourselves together."

And then the sled jerked forward.

Not upwards.

He jerked forward.

As if he first had to learn that flying is not a gift these days, but work.

The sled jerked, and the farmyard responded with that sound you only hear when a lot of wood and a lot of hope are under tension at the same time: a long creak, like a sigh that has been held back for too long.

The reindeer pulled forward, hesitantly at first, then faster. Their hooves dug into the snow, and the snow let go, because snow always lets go. It has no ego. That is its advantage over many other things.

Normally, there comes a moment when the sled's runners become light, when the air suddenly seems friendly, as if it has just decided to cooperate after all. Normally, for a tiny heartbeat, there's this weightlessness that tells you: Yes. This is magic.

The air wasn't friendly today.

Today she was... critical.

She didn't lift the sled. She examined it. She didn't hold it. She asked: Why should I?

Fenna felt it immediately. It was as if someone were pulling at her chest, not brutally, but subtly. As if the air were saying: You can breathe, but you have to earn it.

"Don't breathe fast," Alva whispered as she held the song. "Don't let yourself be chased."

Marei stood by the sled's core, her hands just above the casing, looking as if she were calming an animal that was both useful and hungry. "He's pulling," she gasped. "He's pulling on everything."

Fenna gazed at the core. The light glowed steadily, but there was something restless about it, a kind of hunger within the brightness. It was like fire: it's warm as long as it burns, but it consumes what you give it.

"Give him rhythm," Fenna murmured to herself, lifting the bell.

She rang the doorbell once.

Not loud. Not desperate. A clear tone that says: Here is the track. Here is the line. Run on it.

The sled lifted slightly. Not through force, but rather through agreement. As if the air were briefly saying: Okay. One more time.

Tilo rang his bell too, hesitantly, a half-tone. Fenna glanced at him, and Tilo rang again, this time better. The tone was still small, but it was... honest. He wasn't trying to be heroic.

Rubin's nose glowed in time with the music, and Fenna noticed how this time the light not only shone, but pushed. As if it were cutting a path into the invisible.

The dome creaked above them.

Klirr stood at the edge of the courtyard, her eyes on the glass, not because she believed in glass, but because she believed in consequences. "If the jump continues, she'll fall," she murmured.

"Then we'll fly faster," Tilo gasped.

"That's not a strategy," Siv growled.

"It is a hope," said Tilo.

"Hope is not a strategy either," said Siv.

"Yes," said Fenna, without taking his eyes off the sled core. "Hope is what remains when strategies fail."

Siv's mouth twitched slightly. It was almost a smile.

The sled lifted a little more. The runners lifted off the snow, first at the front, then at the back. A tiny moment of weightlessness – but not like usual. More like a strained muscle finally giving way.

"Now," Santa Claus said softly.

He pulled on the reins, and the reindeer sprang forward. Rubin was in front, his nose like a red dot in the grey air. The sleigh surged forward, out of the yard, out of the vicinity of the dome, out into the open sky.

Fenna immediately felt the air thinning as soon as they left the dome behind. The cold wasn't the problem. The cold was a side effect. The problem was the thinning air. Like a blanket slowly being pulled away while you're still underneath it.

Marei gasped. "Don't breathe deeply," she whispered. "Shallow. Evenly."

Tilo nodded, but his eyes were wide. "I hate flat," he muttered. "Flat is for pancakes."

"Flat is for survival," Klirr growled from behind. She had indeed jumped up, right at the edge, because Klirr wasn't the type to leave someone alone in thin air if she could help. She was holding onto a strut as if it were part of the sled that you couldn't just shake off.

"You came along?" gasped Tilo.



“Someone needs to yell at you when you start acting stupid,” said Klirr.

That was, in a strange way, reassuring.

The sled gained altitude. Not quickly. Slowly. The air resisted, pulling at them as if saying: You have no right to do so.

Fenna rang the bell again. The sound was no longer just noise. It was breathing support.

She felt the soot trying to interfere, because thin air is a wonderful breeding ground for panic. And panic is its favorite food. It whispered: You can't breathe. You're right to be afraid. You're going to fall. It will be your fault.

Fenna rang the bell again. Briefly. Clearly. No fight, just form.

Alva sang, softly but powerfully. The tone of her song wasn't perfect, but it was old. And old means: it has borne the weight of worse nights.

Rubin's nose glowed, and the red light began to branch out in the air like fine lines visible only to the naked eye. It was as if Rubin were drawing a path of light across the sky.

“This is...”, Marei began.

“...the Star Path,” Fenna whispered.

Marei nodded, tears in her eyes, not from emotion, but because thin air irritates the eyes. "He's showing us where there might be air," she gasped.

"Air isn't just somewhere," Tilo murmured. "Air is everywhere."

"Not today," said Fenna.

Behind them, far below, the dome creaked one last time.

Fenna turned her head, saw the Polar Court shrink, the workshop a point of light, and saw another crack ripple through the dome. Not quite. But enough to make it look like a shattering star.

"It's tearing," whispered Klirr.

Santa Claus said nothing. He only tightened the reins, as if he could persuade the world to pull itself together.

The sled continued to rise, and the air grew even thinner. Fenna felt her thoughts wanting to slow down. That was dangerous. Not because thinking slowly is bad, but because here it meant: lack of oxygen. Bodies become honest calculators when they can't get enough air. Then only one thing matters: breathing. Falling. Surviving.

And Bilanz... Bilanz loved counting.

Fenna briefly thought of the shadow cloak in the hall, the rustling, the deliberate coldness. She had the feeling that Bilanz was no longer active, but she wasn't sure if that meant it was over. Things like Bilanz don't sleep. They wait.

"Keep the beat," Fenna said quietly, more to herself than to the others.

Tilo rang the bell. Rubin glowed. Alva sang.

And then something strange happened: The starry path before them flickered. Not the light, but the space itself. As if the air had briefly become... thinner than thin. As if it had a hole.

Marei lifted the compass and stared into it. "Up ahead," she whispered. "There's... an area where the air is gone."

"What does that mean?" gasped Tilo.

Klirr growled. "That means we're not just flying. We're flying through a wound."

Santa Claus pulled the reins, but Rubin held the line, his nose glowing hard, as if the light were now not just a way out, but a warning.

Fenna felt her heart beat faster. Not with fear. With realization.

If the air has holes, someone made them.

And Malrik had always said: pressure has to go somewhere.

Perhaps the pressure was no longer low.

Perhaps he was now... in heaven.

The hole in the air didn't look like a hole.

There was no edge. No line. No beautiful, dramatic darkness that says: Here the world ends. It was more like an area where the sky behaved as if it had forgotten how to be sky. The stars beyond looked distorted, as if someone were looking at them through a glass that had become too hot.

Rubin's nose glowed, and the light drew a fine red line along the edge, as if the reindeer had instinctively decided: Not in here. Only past.

Santa Claus pulled on the reins, carefully, as if he were avoiding an animal that one does not want to wake.

The sled responded sluggishly. The air was so thin that every correction felt like pushing a heavy piece of furniture through water.

"Don't go in," whispered Marei, her eyes on the star compass. "There's no buoyancy in there."

"Carrying capacity is a very romantic word for 'not dying'," Tilo gasped.

"Hold on tight," growled Klirr, and in the thin air that was almost a love song.

Alva continued singing. Her song was no longer pleasant, but functional. It was the sound of a bridge that doesn't give way under weight because it remembers its own shape.

Fenna rang the bell, briefly, clearly, keeping time. She noticed that she herself was breathing in rhythm. Long. Short. Long. Pause. Long. If she lost the rhythm, she lost her breath. If she lost her breath, she lost her head. And if she lost her head, the soot immediately found a home.

"Don't count," Fenna murmured.

And as if heaven had heard the word, it whispered.

Not the wind.

Not the cold.

Something that sounded like a thought.

"Compensation."

Fenna felt her stomach clench. The word wasn't loud, but it was heavy. It was the language of balance sheets. The language of spreadsheets. The language of guilt.

"Do you hear that?" gasped Tilo.

Marei nodded, pale. "This isn't in my head," she whispered. "This is... outside."

There was a clanging sound. "Then it's worse."

The area around the air hole flickered, and suddenly Fenna saw something taking shape in the distorted zone. Not solid. More like shadows in a glass of water. Lines contracting, patterns trying to form bodies.

A cloak of darkness that does not blow.

Labels that hang in the air.

Clocks without hands that still tick.

The balance sheet wasn't here, Fenna thought. The balance sheet was empty. The balance sheet was closed.

And yet this form was there, as if someone had reopened the book on a different page.

"No," whispered Fenna.

Siv looked at her, her face hard with cold and attention. "What?" she shouted against the wind.

"It's not a balance sheet," Fenna said. "It's... what a balance sheet wants to create out of thin air. A balance sheet about us. About everything."

Santa Claus said nothing, but Fenna saw his hands tighten on the reins. Not out of anger. Out of decision.

"Go on," he said quietly. "We'll pass by."

The sled approached the edge of the hole.

And suddenly the air became so thin that Fenna felt as if her chest was made of paper. Every breath was a tear.

Tilo gasped, his face gray. "I... I—"

"Ring," whispered Fenna, without looking at him.

Tilo lifted the bell, his hand trembling so much that at first the sound was only a faint clink. Then he drew in air as best he could and rang it properly. A clear tone that didn't go against the hole, but against the panic.

Rubin's nose glowed hard. The red light drew a line, and the sled followed.

The edge of the hole was suddenly right next to them. Fenna felt it like a rim, even though she couldn't see it. The air on her side was thin. The air in the hole was... nonexistent. A nothingness that didn't feel empty, but hungry, because it wanted to draw in everything that still breathed.

And then it whispered again.

This time it's not "compensation".

This time a sentence that burrowed into Fenna like a splinter:

"You were too late."

Fenna stumbled inwardly. Too late. It was her sentence. Her old sentence. The sentence she always carries with her, even if she doesn't say it aloud. Too late for help. Too late for order. Too late for...

The soot rejoiced.

Fenna rang the bell, hard, as hard as she could, without breaking the tone.

"No," she said loudly, her voice thin, but there. "I am here."

The sentence wasn't beautiful. It was simply true. And sometimes, truth is simply presence.

The hole flickered.

In the flickering edge of the light, Fenna briefly saw a figure, as if someone had flashed out of nowhere. A coat. A crooked cap. A split beard.

Malrik.

Not complete. Not certain. More like a memory disguised to appear stronger.

Tilo gasped. "I—I saw him."

"Don't look," Klirr growled. "Don't discuss it."

Malrik – or the image of him – smiled this half-smile, and Fenna heard his voice, even though she knew it wasn't real:

"You let me down."

Fenna felt the sentence affect them all. It affected Tilo because Tilo was there. It affected Klirr because Klirr feels responsible, even when she wasn't there. It affected Santa Claus because Santa Claus feels guilty when someone falls, even if he couldn't prevent it.

The soot rejoiced: Guilt. Balance sheet. Reconciliation.

Fenna rang the bell. Tilo rang the bell. Alva sang. Rubin glowed.

Santa Claus finally spoke, calmly, clearly, in thin air:

"You let yourself fall."

The sentence was like a knife, but not born of hatred. Born of reality.

Malrik's image flickered as if it hadn't expected this version.

"And I won't let myself fall," Santa Claus said quietly. "Not today."

The sled passed by the edge of the hole.

For a moment the air was so thin that Fenna thought she would faint. Stars became dots. Dots became nothing. Her head felt heavy.

Then – suddenly – the air felt...present again. Still thin, but no longer full of holes. Like a room that accepts you again because you didn't fall into it.

Behind them, the hole flickered once more, as if it were angry that it could not close a bill.

And then it was just sky again.

Not friendly. But there.

Marei gasped, her eyes moist. "That was..." she began.

"...a wound," said Klirr.

Siv looked back, her forehead hard. "And the wound isn't gone," she said. "It's just... behind us."

Fenna held the bell tightly, feeling the rhythm in her chest. She knew: when the air had holes, when shadows counted in the height, when Malrik's image appeared in nothingness, then the problem had grown bigger.

She looked ahead.

The star trail was still there, thin, red, a thread in the sky.

And far ahead, at the edge of the view, lay something dark that didn't look like night, but like a storm that was already waiting.

"We have to get through this," Fenna whispered.

Santa Claus nodded.

The sled moved on.

And the air remained thin, as if it were saying to them: I am carrying you. But I will remember everything.

## Christmas – almost

There is a point in every night when you think you've got the worst behind you.

That's the moment when the night pauses briefly, clears its throat, and says: Very nice. Now pay attention.

The storm before them wasn't just weather. Weather is honest. Weather comes because physics wills it. This storm came because something needed it. Because somewhere a false note remained unfinished and now, high in the thin air, it was trying to hide in clouds so no one would see it.

The path of stars that Rubin traced grew thinner, more tremulous, as if the light itself were questioning whether it was wise to enter it. Rubin's nose glowed hard, but no longer serenely. More like a small, red eye, constantly blinking because it no longer likes the white around it.

Santa Claus held the reins firmly. Not tensely. Firmly, like someone who knows: If I loosen my grip now, the sleigh won't just lose altitude. It will lose its balance.

Beneath them, the Arctic Ocean was just a vague outline. Ice floes were small, gray specks. The world was far away, and that made everything both easier and worse. Easier, because you don't see the chaos so clearly. Worse, because you know it's there nonetheless.

"Time?" gasped Marei, pressing the star compass almost to her chest as if it could warm her.

Klirr didn't look at anything, because in thin air you don't have anything you could officially call a "clock". "Too little," she said.

Tilo had one foot on a strut, his hand on the wood, the bell on his belt. He was breathing shallowly, as he'd been told, but each breath sounded like a decision. "If anyone says 'too little' again," he muttered, "I'll start shouting 'too much,' just in protest."

Siv stood at the edge of the sled, looking ahead as if trying to see a path through the storm. "In there," she said softly, "there's no wind. In there is... weight."

Fenna felt it too. Not physically. More like a feeling you get when someone in the room shifts the mood. The storm felt like a verdict that had already been passed and was now simply seeking punishment.

"This is the last stand," whispered Alva, whose voice was barely audible in the song. She sang nonetheless. If you had asked her why, she probably would have said: Because I'm still here.

Santa Claus nodded without turning around. "Then we'll get him out of the way," he said.

The sled disappeared into the clouds.

Visibility vanished instantly. Everything turned gray. Not the friendly gray of fog, but the aggressive gray of snow dust slapping you in the face. The wind came from all sides, like hands that don't know where to grasp, so they grasp everywhere.

The reindeer struggled. Their bodies jerked in their harnesses, the wings of air that usually carried them felt heavy here. Rubin glowed brighter, and its light tried to paint a path in the gray, but the storm ate the lines as if they were chalk on wet stone.

Fenna rang the bell once, briefly, clearly. The sound was small in the storm, but it was there. And sometimes "there" is all you need.

Then the storm whispered.

Not like wind. Like a voice that blends into the noise, just so you're not sure if you're really hearing it or if your mind is inventing it.

"Almost."

Tilo swallowed. "Did... did the storm just say 'almost'?"

"Don't answer," Klirr growled.

Siv glanced briefly at Fenna. "That's... accounting jargon," she whispered.

Fenna nodded. "Or Russian language. Or both."

The storm whispered again, and this time it was not just a word, but a sentence, placed over the mouth like a wet glove:

"Christmas... almost."

Marei gasped. "This is... like mockery."

"No," Fenna said quietly. "This is an offer."

An offer is worse than mockery. You can hate mockery. You can accept offers.

The storm tugged at the sled. The runners trembled. Wood groaned. A strut cracked, somewhere in the back, and Fenna felt Klirr instinctively cling to it, as if she could hold a plank together with sheer rage.

"Keep the beat!" shouted Fenna.

Alva sang. Tilo rang the doorbell. Fenna rang the doorbell. Rubin glowed.

Santa Claus said nothing. He simply held the reins and kept the course, although keeping a course in a storm is a concept that usually makes people laugh.

Then something flickered in the grey.

A point of light.

Not Ruby's Light.

A different light. Whiter. Colder.

"There!" shouted Siv.

Fenna blinked. In the storm, a shape appeared, briefly visible: a circle of frost, suspended. Like a seal in the air. And within it, something moved that looked like a shadow trying to solidify.

Balance sheet?

Or something that wanted to make a balance sheet out of the sky.

The circle pulled on the sled as if it were a magnet.

"Don't go in!" Marei shouted.

Santa Claus pushed on, but the air was thin, the storm fierce, and suddenly there was this feeling: The sleigh isn't just being pushed. It's being calculated.

Fenna sensed numbers in her mind, not as mathematics, but as judgment: too late, too little, almost.

And then, in the middle of the circle, she saw something that took her breath away, even though she already had hardly any air.

One package.

Black bound.



With a label.

Not "Santa Claus".

Not "Fenna".

Another name.

A name that came as a shock that night because it hung there so impossibly.

Ruby Rednose

"No," whispered Fenna.

The storm whispered: "Equalization."

And the circle drew stronger.

Rubin's nose flickered.

The star trail briefly broke off, as if the light itself had twitched.

Karr shouted something forward, a stable curse formula, which was probably actually a prayer.

Tilo reached for his bell, his hand trembling.

Fenna knew: This isn't just weather. This is a trap disguised as necessity.

And that is precisely the worst kind of trap.

The circle of frost hung in the storm like an eye.

Not an eye that sees, but one that counts. It pulled on the sled, and Fenna felt the air around her harden, as if the cloud itself were suddenly saying: You won't get through here without paying something.

The black package bearing Rubin's name rotated slowly, as if it were an offer to whoever would grab it first. And therein lay the poison: the package wasn't Rubin. Rubin stood at the front of the harness, alive, glowing, cursing in reindeer language. The package was a story about Rubin. A bill for Rubin. A "what if" meant to be swallowed until it festered in the gut.

"Don't look," Klirr growled, but her voice was too short, too thin. The storm swallowed syllables and spat out fear.

Ruby's nose flickered again. The star trail tore briefly, then returned. As if Ruby were shining his light against an invisible handle.

Karr shouted forward, this time clearly: "Ruby! Stop!"

The reindeer snorted hard, and Fenna felt the light tense up, as if Rubin were using a muscle that one doesn't normally train.

"Equalization," whispered the storm again.

Marei held up the star compass. The bright streams within it were no longer smooth. They trembled like threads pulled too hard. And the dark stream... the dark stream curled toward the frost circle, as if it had found a friend there.

"That's not a balance sheet," Marei gasped. "That's... a balance sheet reflex. The form that emerges when the air is thin enough that everything becomes a judgment."

"Does such a thing exist?" exclaimed Tilo.

Marei looked at him, and her gaze said: Today everything is available.

Fenna rang the bell once, clearly. The sound clashed against the gray, and for a moment the frost circle became transparent, as if the sound were peeling off its mask.

Fenna glanced inside briefly – and regretted it almost immediately.

She didn't just see the package. She saw what was inside: not Rubin, but a picture of Rubin, dead. Still. A light that's out. A sentence about the future: Then it's all over.

The soot inside her cheered and whispered: You are right to be afraid. You will be to blame.

Fenna rang again, hard, and tore her gaze away before the sentence could take hold.

"Don't look inside!" she shouted.

"I didn't—" Tilo began.

"Good!" Fenna snarled. "That's how it should stay!"

Santa Claus pulled on the reins, but the sleigh still drifted, slowly, toward the Frost Circle. Not because he was steering wrong. Because the storm was fierce. Because the air was thin. Because a hole in the world always creates a pull.

"We'll get in there," Siv growled.

"Then we'll break the circle," Tilo said immediately, and that was the old reflex: cut, hit, loosen, destroy.

Fenna shook her head. "If you break the circle, the judgment spreads," she gasped. "Then it's everywhere. Then the storm is no longer one place, but the sky."

There was a clinking sound. "Then what?"

Fenna breathed shallowly. Her head was heavy. The storm whispered "almost" into every pause. Christmas... almost... rescue... almost... air... almost...

"We... don't pay," Fenna said quietly.

"Excuse me?" gasped Tilo.

"We don't pay," Fenna repeated. "This thing wants us to give something. Guilt. Anger. Victimhood. If we pay, it learns that it works."

Marei nodded slowly. "Then we have to... fly past without reacting."

"That's easier said than done when the air—" Klirr began.

"I know," said Fenna.

Rubin's nose flickered again, and this time his snort sounded almost like a protest. As if Rubin were saying: I am not your bill. I am your light.

"Ruby," Fenna whispered, although she wasn't sure if animals could hear words or only sounds in thin air. "Hold."

Karr pressed his forehead against Rubin's neck, there in the harness, as if radiating his own warmth. "Stop, boy," he muttered. "Stop, you burning idiot."

That was stable poetry.

Alva sang louder. Her song cut through the noise, not like a sword, but like a rope. The rhythm became clearer. Long. Short. Long. Pause. Long.

Fenna rang the bell in this rhythm.

Tilo heard it, and without thinking, he rang the bell along. Not perfectly, but close enough that the room acquired a rhythm that wasn't caused by the storm.

Rubin's nose began to pulsate in precisely that rhythm, and this time the light didn't just trace a line forward. It settled like a thin layer over the air, as if Rubin were saying: Here. This air. This.

Santa Claus felt it. Fenna saw it in his hands. He no longer pulled against the storm, but with its rhythm. He used the light as a path.

The sled glided – sluggishly, creaking – past the frost circle.

The circle moved.

The circle whispered.

"Almost," he said.

"No," said Santa Claus.

Just this one word. No lecture. No moral. No explanation. Just no. Not as defiance. As a decision.

The frost circle flickered. The package bearing Rubin's name spun faster, as if angered by no one's reaching for it.

The storm intensified. Snow whipped across the ground. The reindeer panted. Fenna felt her head grow heavy again.

And then came the next sentence, deeper, meaner:

"No sacrifice... no gift."

The soot rejoiced. That's a nice sentence. An old sentence. A sentence you hear so often that you eventually believe it.

Fenna felt Marei flinch. She felt Klirr tense her jaw. She felt Tilo almost lose his breath. She felt Santa Claus fall silent for the length of a heartbeat.

Because the statement was close to the truth.

No gift without sacrifice.

It's true. Someone always pays. Time. Work. Love. Back. Hands. Nights.

And that's precisely why he was dangerous. Because the balance sheet could take him and turn that into a demand: Then give more. Then give everything. Then give yourself.

Fenna rang the bell, harshly, her tone almost breaking, so much did her hand tremble. "Sacrifice is not guilt," she gasped. "Sacrifice is choice!"

Alva's song rose, and in that second it sounded not like comfort, but like resistance.

The sled almost missed the circle.

Almost.

This word hung like a knife in the storm.

And the frost circle did what such things do when they sense they are about to go away empty-handed:

He pulled one last time, abruptly.

The sled tipped over.

Not completely.

But enough to cause a strut to crack and a package to slide off the edge of the sled.

A small gift with a blue ribbon.

It fell into the storm.

And the storm swallowed it up, greedily, like a balance sheet that finally gets a number.

Tilo screamed, "No!"

Fenna grabbed his arm. "No!"

Too late. Tilo had looked. He had reacted. The soot had its moment.

The frost circle flickered, and Fenna felt the storm briefly intensify, as if it had learned: Ah. That's how you get them.

The sled stabilized again, but the price hung in the air: a gift lost, a heart scratched, an "almost" in every lung.

"Go on!" shouted Klirr.

"We can't—" Tilo began, his eyes wide.

"Yes," Klirr growled. "We must."

Santa Claus pulled the reins. Ruby glowed. Alva sang. Fenna rang the bell.

The frost circle remained behind them.

But Fenna knew: He had gotten what he wanted.

Not the gift.

The reaction.

And when something like a balance sheet collects reactions, it eventually calculates again.

The lost gift was just a package.

A little bit of paper, a little bit of ribbon, a little bit of hope in a handy form.

But it fell, and the moment the storm swallowed it, Fenna felt something inside them all give way briefly. Not much. Not dramatic. Just that tiny inner "shit" that immediately feels bigger in thin air because you have no reserves to breathe it away.

Tilo was still staring into the gray swirl, as if he could retrieve the package with his eyes. "It was so small," he whispered, and in his voice was that childlike horror that adults usually hide so well: Something good is gone, and you saw it.

Klirr grabbed him by the collar of his coat and pulled him closer. Not brutally, more practically. "Look ahead," she growled.

"But—"

"Forward," Klirr repeated. Her eyes were hard, but beneath them lay something else: she knew exactly how painful such a loss was. She just wouldn't let it become fatal.

Fenna rang the bell once, clearly. The sound was like a hinge, turning her head back in the right direction.

Siv kept her gaze fixed on the storm. "We're through," she said, and she didn't sound relieved. More like suspicious. "Or... almost."

The word hung in the air immediately, as if the storm had thrown it after them.

Marei raised the star compass. The bright streams within it were calmer, but thin, like a song growing hoarse. "The circle is gone," she gasped. "But... the echo remains."

"Reverberation is putting it kindly," Alva murmured, and she continued singing as if she could squeeze reverberation into rhythm.

The sky in front of them became brighter.

Not because the sun rose—at the North Pole, "sun" is a rumor, something you sometimes briefly check and then forget—but because lights appeared beneath them. Dots. Rows. Small warm spots in the dark world.

Cities.

Villages.

Window.

The moment when you normally think: Now it begins.

And that's when Fenna realized how thin the air really was.

Not just physically.

Magical.

The world below them felt... farther away than usual. As if there were an additional distance between the sled and the earth, not measured in meters, but in doubt.

"We are too high," Marei whispered.

Santa Claus pulled the reins, and the sleigh sank a little. But it didn't sink as smoothly as usual. It sank jerkily, as if the air wasn't providing it with even support.

"The load-bearing capacity..." Marei gasped. "It's not stable. We're... almost in the right range, but—"

"—but not quite," Tilo murmured, and the word immediately tasted like storm.

Fenna heard it too. Not as a real voice, but rather as an echo that lay in the pauses between breaths.

Christmas... almost.

An offer. A mockery. A threat. And deep down, a truth: This night, it really could almost stay that way.

Santa Claus spoke softly, more to the reindeer than to the others. "Evenly," he said. "Evenly."

Ruby glowed, and the path of the stars became clearer again. A red thread stretching downwards to a place where a child would sleep, unaware that a battle was taking place above its roof.

The sled approached the first roof.

Normally, this moment feels effortless. The sled glides, the air carries it, the world briefly holds its breath.

Today the world held its breath.

She barely had him.

The sled started to pull over the first chimney – and stumbled.

Not visible. But perceptible. As if an invisible edge briefly grabbed him.

Fenna rang the bell immediately, and the sound was like a grasp. The sled caught itself and glided on. A package slid out of a box, not into the storm, but into Fenna's hands. She squeezed it tightly, as if it were a small heart.

"That was close," Tilo gasped.

"Everything is in short supply," Klirr growled.

Santa Claus dropped the first present. It didn't fly perfectly, but it flew. It glided through the air, landed on the roof, slid a bit, then got stuck, as if the world had briefly decided to lend a hand.

A small success.

A small "yes" in a night full of "almosts".

They flew on.

Second roof.

Third.

The air remained thin. The magic held, but not without risk. Fenna had to constantly keep the beat. Alva had to sing, even when her voice grew hoarse. Tilo had to ring the bell, even though his hands were so cold he could barely feel whether he was actually holding it or just hoping.

And while they worked, while they dropped gifts like little lifeboats into a dark sea, Fenna realized that "almost" everything had changed.

It was no longer just a storm.

It was in the margins of her thoughts.

As if something mattered: How many gifts do they manage to give? How many fall? How many children get nothing? How many mistakes?

Balance sheet, Fenna thought.

Not as a figure.

As an attitude.

Like an internal computer that hasn't been switched off, but simply isn't being fed.

And then it happened again.

A package slipped.

Not because someone was careless. But because the sled briefly dipped, as if the air had caught it. The package slid over the edge.

Tilo jumped forward, reached for it – and missed.

It fell.

Not into the storm this time, but into the night beneath them.

And in that second the sentence was there, quite clearly:

"You were too late."

Tilo closed his eyes. Fenna saw his face wince, as if he'd been hit. He wanted to scream. He wanted to apologize. He wanted to... pay.

Fenna stepped up to him and grabbed his shoulder. "Tilo," she said softly.

"I've got it—" he began.

"No," said Fenna.

She lifted the bell and rang it.

Once. For a long time.

The sound was like a hand pulling him back.

"You didn't do it on purpose," Fenna said. "That's what counts."

"But the child—"



"The child," said Fenna, "is not defined by your mistake. And neither are you."

The sentence was dangerous because it sounded almost like consolation. Consolation is good. But consolation is also a place where you lie down and never get up again.

Fenna didn't let him lie there.

"Breathe," she said.

Tilo breathed.

They flew on.

The lights below them drifted by. Roof after roof. Gift after gift.

And somewhere, very quietly, there was that whisper again, no longer as cheeky as in the storm, rather... contented:

"Almost enough."

Fenna felt her stomach clench. Almost enough? That was the worst kind of surrender: a surrender disguised as reason.

Santa Claus looked ahead, his hands firmly on the reins. "Almost isn't enough," he said quietly, more to himself than to them. But Fenna heard him.

And she knew: He wasn't saying that because he wanted perfection.

He says it because "almost" is a hole into which you can drop everything.

They flew on, lower and lower, closer and closer. Alva's voice grew hoarse. Marei's hands trembled. Klirr clung on, growling every time wood creaked. Siv remained vigilant, as if searching the shadows for a new trap. Rubin glowed bravely, but Fenna saw its light flicker briefly at times, as if it too were growing weary.

And among them: a world that knew nothing about it.

Christmas, Fenna thought.

Almost.

And then she saw something on the horizon that didn't belong to that night: a grey stripe that moved like a mouth.

A snowstorm.

A real one this time? Or just the next part of the bill?

Fenna swallowed.

They had handed out gifts.

They had made mistakes.

They had continued.

And yet there was this feeling: the worst part of this night was still somewhere, waiting until they were tired enough to "almost" accept it.

## Swallowed up in the snowstorm

The new storm on the horizon looked more honest than the previous one.

That was the problem.

The circle of frost in the gray had been something that had pretended to be weather, but in reality was playing a game of accounting. That strip up ahead was simply white, simply vast, simply wind that had decided it wanted to own everything today.

A true storm means: no intention. No recrimination. No mockery.

A real storm means: You don't matter.

And on a night when they had fought against things they considered personal, "it doesn't matter" was almost a relief. Almost. Because "it doesn't matter" also means: you don't get special treatment when you're exhausted.

"That's a real one," Siv murmured, gazing at the white wall.

"He still seems offended," Tilo gasped.

"That's wind," said Klirr. "Wind is always offended."

Santa Claus pulled on the reins, and the sleigh made a slow turn, as carefully as if it were flying around a sleeping dragon. Only this dragon wasn't a creature. It was air and ice and the sheer quantity of particles that had decided to collectively create a problem.

Marei stared at the star compass as if trying to squeeze a map from the trembling currents. "If we dodge," she whispered, "we lose time. If we fly in, we lose... sight. And maybe... ourselves."

"That's a nice selection," Tilo murmured. "Time or existence."

Alva hardly sang anymore. Not because she wanted to stop, but because at some point the voice becomes just a thin thread, and thin threads break if you stretch them too much. She murmured more than she sang, but even this murmuring kept the beat in the sleigh like a small, old lamp.

Rubin's nose glowed, but the light was tired. It was no longer the clear red of the beginning. It was a red you only see if you look closely. A red that nevertheless says: I'm here. For now.

Fenna didn't ring the bell constantly. She had learned that a tone can also wear out if you use it like panic. She simply held it steady, and the rhythm lay in her chest like a second heart.

Santa Claus spoke softly. "We'll go around the outside," he said.

A clinking sound growled. "The outside is longer."

"Outside is possible," he said.

Siv nodded briefly. "Good choice," she said.

And at that very moment, when the decision had been made, what always happens on nights like this happened: The world laughed quietly and changed the rules.

The storm was moving.

Not slow. Not majestic.

It jerked to the left like a curtain, as if someone had grabbed it by the edge. The white wall moved precisely into its path, as if the heavens had decided: there is no outside.

"Damn it," growled Klirr.

"That wasn't a cloud," Marei whispered, her voice suddenly thin with fear. "That was... a front. It's moving towards us."

Tilo swallowed. "So we're flying in."

"We're flying in," said Santa Claus.

Rubin snorted as if he had a veto, but he drew his weapon anyway. Reindeer logic: If you have no choice, at least don't make a fuss about it. Rebellion wastes air.

The sled plunged into the snowstorm.

And the world disappeared.

Not slow. Not poetic.

Simply gone.

White noise. Wind everywhere. Snow slapping you in the eyes as if it had personal reasons. The wood of the sleigh creaked, the reindeer panted, and every sound was instantly swallowed up by the storm and spat out again, altered, distorted.

Fenna immediately felt the air thinning even further. Not just because of the altitude. Because of the chaos. Chaos robs you of rhythm. And without rhythm, in thin air, all you have is instinct. And instinct, as Fenna now knew, is a place where soot happily pays rent.

"Hold on tight!" shouted Klirr.

"That's the standard strategy in every storm!" Tilo shouted back.

"Then do them well!" Klirr roared.

Santa Claus was pulling the reins, but it was as if he were pulling on an idea. The storm had no edges to steer by. It was simply everywhere, and everywhere is difficult to steer.

Marei held the star compass aloft, but the currents within it were now dancing. Not pretty. Panicked. The dark current coiled tightly, as if rejoicing.

"I can't see anything!" Marei exclaimed.

"Nobody sees anything!" Siv shouted.

Rubin's nose glowed, and for a moment there was a red spot in the white, like a dot on a blank sheet of paper. Fenna clung to that spot, not just with her eyes, but with her whole head.

She rang the bell once, of course.

The sound was barely audible in the storm, but it was there – and important. It was a beat that did not come from the wind.

Alva murmured to the rhythm, and Fenna heard the old song in her murmuring, not as a melody, but as a structure.

Long. Short. Long. Pause. Long.

The sled lurched. One runner lifted, then slammed down again. Wood creaked. A package slipped and got stuck.

"We're losing our way!" Marei shouted.

"Which line?!" Tilo yelled.

Santa's voice was suddenly clear, amidst the chaos. "Ruby!"

The reindeer snorted, its nose glowed brighter, and the red light became so intense for a heartbeat that Fenna thought the storm was receding.

He did not budge.

But he showed something.

A dark shape, in short, in white.

Not a cloud. Not night.

Something that went downwards.

"Downdraft!" Siv shouted immediately.

Too late. The sleigh was grabbed as if someone had pulled on it from below. The reindeer bellowed, the harness tightened, the sleigh sank abruptly, and Fenna felt her stomach lurch as if gravity were laughing.

"Stop!" Klirr yelled.

Fenna rang the bell, hard.

The sound cut through the panic in her head, but the air was too wild. The sled didn't freefall, but it fell. Tough, jerky, like a stone refusing to be a stone.

And then Fenna saw it.

In the midst of the white rush, beside the sled, a figure briefly appeared. Not made of snow. Not of wind. A dark silhouette, unmoved by the storm.

A crooked cap.

A split beard.

Malrik.

Or something that Malrik could imitate very well.

He was there, for just a breath, and his half-smile was so clear that Fenna almost forgot to breathe.

"Almost," whispered the storm, or the figure, or its own head.

Fenna felt the sled sink further.

They were caught in the storm.

They had no visibility.

The air was thin.

And now there was that catch again: the picture of Malrik, right where you're most tired.

It was as if the storm itself had decided to be more than just weather.

"No!" Fenna screamed, and she didn't know whether she was addressing the word to the storm, to the figure, to her own brain, or to gravity, which was acting as if it were in charge of everything.

Malrik's silhouette remained beside the sled, as if strolling in the wind. It didn't move like a body. It moved like an idea that had decided to be visible. The crooked cap hung exactly as it did, the beard was split exactly as it did, and the half-smile was the worst detail because it carried the phrase "I know you" in a single corner of its mouth.

Tilo saw it too. Fenna saw it in his face – that brief, horrified widening of his eyes, as if someone were dumping the night of the North Sea back into his head.

"That's him," he gasped.

"No," Klirr growled immediately. "That's a mask."

Siv raised her arm, pointing forward. "Don't look!" she yelled. "If you look, you'll lose the beat!"

"What beat?!" Tilo shouted back, and it was both a joke and a despair, because his body had long since understood that air is not just air, but an account that is currently running dry.

Fenna rang the bell.

Once. Briefly. Clearly.

The sound was like a matchstick in a snowdrift in the storm. It didn't start a fire. But it said: Here. A point. A now.

Alva murmured in rhythm, and Fenna heard Alva's voice crack but not break. That was the difference between old and tired: old has cracks, but it still holds.

The sleigh continued to descend, jerkily. The reindeer struggled against their harnesses. Rubin glowed, but his light flickered, because even light must eventually breathe. Karr roared forward, not in words, but in a barnyard cry that calms animals because it comes from long experience.

"Ruby! Stop!" shouted Karr.

Rubin snorted hard, his nose glowed, and for a moment the star path was there again, but in here it was only a thin red thread in the white, which immediately disappeared again.

"We are being swallowed up," Marei gasped, and she sounded as if she meant it literally, as if the storm really had a maw.

The silhouette beside them was smiling.

"You let me down," said Malrik's voice – and Fenna knew immediately that this was not the voice of flesh, but the voice you hear when guilt takes on a body.

Tilo flinched as if someone had pulled at his heart.

Klirr grabbed his arm. "Don't react!" she yelled.

"But-"

"That's exactly what it wants!" Klirr snarled.

Fenna saw the silhouette draw ever so slightly closer. Not physically. More like... in her perception. As if the storm were making the image larger, so that it would take up more space in her mind.

"Almost," it whispered.

Fenna felt the sentence trying to penetrate her chest: Almost is enough. Almost is better than nothing. Almost is sensible.

And that was precisely where the danger lay. Not in fear. In reason that is weary.

The sled lurched downwards again. Wood creaked, and a rope snapped somewhere at the back, a harsh crack in the white. A sack swung, held in place by Klirr as if she had nailed it to the sled in sheer fury.

"We're losing cargo!" she shouted.

"We're losing ourselves!" gasped Marei.

Siv grabbed a strut, bent forward, her eyes narrowed as if she could actually read something in the white. "Downdraft isn't natural," she exclaimed. "It's... channeled!"

Fenna blinked. "Pardon?"

Siv pointed her chin into the white expanse, precisely where the air was darker, where the snow flowed slightly differently. "There's a gully!" she cried. "An air trench. As if someone had guided the wind!"

Malrik.

Fenna thought about Malrik's equipment, about rhythm, about pressure, about the saying: pressure has to go somewhere. If someone can make a hole in the air, someone can also build a downdraft like a slide.

Or balance sheet.

Or both.

"Get out of the gutter!" Siv yelled.

Santa Claus pulled the reins, but the sleigh was heavy, the air thin, the storm raging. It felt like pulling a boat against a current, only the current was made of air, not water, which made it even worse because you didn't even get wet. You just died dry.

Fenna rang the bell again, this time in rhythm, fast enough that the sound was not just a point, but a line.

Long. Short. Long. Pause. Long.

Alva muttered, and her voice rose for a moment, even though that wasn't really possible. It was as if she was raising her voice out of defiance.

Rubin glowed in time with the music, and Fenna saw how the red light on the side of the sled formed a thin wall. Not a sign. More like a warning to the air: This way.

The sled jerked to one side. Not much. But enough for the reindeer to feel the pressure differently. The harness strained, the animals bleated, but they pulled because they could, and because they didn't have time to be offended.

The silhouette beside them suddenly became blurry, as if it had briefly lost its grip because Fenna was no longer responding to it.

"It's your fault," she whispered.

Fenna said nothing. She just rang the doorbell.

And in that ringing was the message: If you want me, you have to get me. I won't give myself up willingly.

Tilo gasped for air, and Fenna heard him whisper something, barely audible in the storm: "You let yourself fall."

The sentence that Santa Claus had said. Tilo now swallowed it like a stone, so that the guilt wouldn't have so much space.

The sled jerked again – but this time not downwards. Sideways. They pushed themselves out of the chute, piece by piece, as if crawling out of a vortex.

"Not yet!" Siv yelled.

Santa Claus pulled, the reins tight, his body still. He wasn't a man who shouted against the storm. He was a man who counted in the storm – but differently. Not counting the balance sheet. Counting the course.

Marei held the star compass, and this time the bright streams arranged themselves minimally, as if they were recognizing what direction was.

And then – suddenly – the white became lighter. Not so dense anymore. The storm was still there, but it wasn't everywhere anymore.

They were on the edge.

The sled jumped, a short, painful jerk, as if it were being torn from something sticky.

Fenna breathed in, and for the first time in minutes, air felt like air again.

The silhouette beside them flickered, becoming thinner. The half-smile remained, but it now seemed... angrier.

"Almost," she whispered one last time.

Fenna rang the bell hard, once.



“No,” she said loudly.

The silhouette disappeared.

Not because she was defeated. Because, for the time being, she had lost her grip.

The storm was still there, but now it was just a storm again. No voice. No mask. Just wind that didn't like you, because wind doesn't like anyone.

"We're out," gasped Tilo.

“Almost,” Klirr growled automatically, and then she bit her tongue as if she had just realized she had used the wrong word.

Fenna looked ahead.

They had lost altitude. A lot. Dark shapes appeared below them – no roofs, no lights. Just white land, blank expanses, a sea of snow.

"Where are we?" gasped Marei.

Siv stared down. "Drifted too far," she said. "If we have to land now..."

Santa Claus looked down, then forward, at the still raging wall. His voice was quiet, but clear.

“We are not landing,” he said.

"We can't go on," Marei whispered.

“Then,” said Santa Claus, “we will find air that still holds.”

And at that exact moment, as if the storm had been waiting for just that word, a gust of wind came, so hard that the sled tipped over, wood screamed, and the reindeer briefly lost their rhythm.

Fenna grabbed for a strut – too late.

She felt something grab her coat, not a hand, but the wind itself, and she was pulled backward, away from the core, away from the center, away from the others.

For one heartbeat, she hung above nothingness.

And then the storm really did tear them apart.

From the sled.

Into the white wall.

Fenna didn't fall like in stories.

In stories, one falls with a heroic cry and a fluttering cloak that poetically defys gravity. In stories, one has time to think of everything that matters, and the world pauses briefly so the scene can be perfectly framed.

In a snowstorm, you fall like a wet thought.

A jolt.

A white that swallows everything.

And then just: wind.

Fenna first felt the pain in her arm, because she must have hit something during the breakaway. Then she felt the rope tugging at her belt, as if it were a final, faint sentence: You still belong somewhere. The sled was gone, but not completely. Somewhere above her, invisible, something was pulling at her. Or she was pulling at it. It was hard to tell, because the storm has no direction, only force.

She gripped the rope tightly, and in her other hand – astonishingly, absurdly enough to almost laugh – she was still holding the bell.

That was ridiculous.

And that's exactly why it was important.

The bell was a piece of order in a place that ordered nothing. Fenna pressed it to her chest as if it were a small heart that mustn't be lost, otherwise everything would fall apart.

She tried to breathe.

The air was there, but it was like sand. Every breath scratched. Every breath tasted of snow, of wind, of the feeling that the world didn't particularly need you.

Then a different taste emerged.

Soot.

So easy. So nasty. Like a thought creeping through the snow and saying: There's room here.

Fenna felt the sentence already beginning.

You're too late.

You are not enough.

Almost.

She gritted her teeth and rang the bell.

Once.

The sound was barely audible in the storm. But it was palpable. It vibrated through her chest, through her arm, through the rope. And in that vibration lay: No. Not today. Not here.

The rope jerked.

Fenna was pulled upwards, jerkily, as if someone were trying to catch her. Then she was yanked downwards again, because the storm doesn't negotiate. It takes.

"Stop!" she wanted to scream, but the storm swallowed the scream. It got stuck in her mouth, became breath, became cough.

She had no view. No sense of height. No feeling for up or down. Only the rope as a line that says: There is something there.

And then – in the middle of the white – a shadow appeared.

Not the shadow of Malrik.

A real shadow.

A dark spot that grew larger, and Fenna realized: soil.

She hit the ground.

Not gentle. Not heroic. The snow was deep, but deep doesn't mean soft. Deep means: you're braking in a hundred different ways at once. It ripped the air from her lungs. Her head slammed against something hard under the snow—ice or stone—and stars exploded behind her eyes.

For a moment she simply lay there, half in the snow, half in the air, and the white above her was a roof she had not chosen.

The rope was gone.

Or torn down.

Or the sled had moved on.

Fenna didn't know. She heard nothing but wind.

She felt for the bell.

She was still there.

Of course it was still there, thought a small, sarcastic part of her. Because the universe has a sense of humor. If you're going to lose everything, at least it leaves you with that little thing that reminds you that you still have something to do.

Fenna laboriously rolled onto her back. Her breathing was shallow. The storm lashed over her. Snow instantly filled her hair, her collar, the corners of her mouth. She spat, tasting salt and cold.

“Okay,” she whispered, and the wind took the word and carried it away as if it were its own.

She had to get up. Not out of heroism. Because of physics. Lying down means freezing.

She pushed herself up, slowly, every muscle protesting. Her arm ached, her head throbbed. She finally stood, unsteady, and saw... nothing. Only white.

Ruby's light was gone.

Alva's song was gone.

The sled was gone.

She was alone in a snowstorm.

And at that exact moment, there was that whisper again, not loud, not clear, but familiar like a bad thought:

"Almost."

Fenna closed her eyes. She felt the soot wanting to settle in the emptiness of the air. Loneliness is a large apartment.

She rang the bell.

Long. Short. Long. Pause. Long.

Not because she believed the storm could hear it.

Because she had to hear it herself.

She opened her eyes and began to walk.

Not in a direction she could see. But in a direction she chose. She placed one foot in front of the other, deep in the snow, her legs heavy. Each step was a declaration: I am here. I am going.

After perhaps ten steps, she saw something dark in the white. A shape. A piece of wood.

She stumbled over, felt around – and found part of the sled's construction. A strut. Broken. With a piece of blue ribbon attached.

A gift ribbon.

Fenna swallowed. So some of them had fallen too.

She picked up the strut, more out of instinct than logic. Wood is warmth, if you can burn it. And a piece of sled provides orientation, because it means: You're not completely lost.

She walked on.

The wind pushed her back. The snow gripped her legs. The soot whispered sentences. Fenna rang her bell against the sentences, not against the wind.

And then – after a time that didn't feel like time, but like a grey mass – she heard something.

Not wind.

A sound.

Very weak.

A little bell.

Not her little bell.

Another.

Fenna stopped, her heart pounding.

Again.

A soft clink.

And behind it... a sound that doesn't belong in the storm: creaking wood. A breath. A gasp.

"Ruby?" Fenna whispered, even though she knew it was nonsense. Ruby was up. Ruby was light. Ruby was gone.

But hope is often nonsense before it proves to be true.

She walked towards the noise.

The storm briefly intensified, then thinned again, and suddenly there was a dark wall in the white. Not sky. Not sea. A cliff. A slope. And on this slope – half windblown, half stuck fast – lay something.

A small sled.

Not the big one.

A sidecar sled, one of those supply things you carry in case you need to land somewhere.

And a rope hung from it – from the drawbar.

The rope that Fenna had felt against her just moments before.

Beside the sled stood a figure, hunched over, hands on the wood, head down. A coat, white with snow.

Fenna stepped closer, cautiously, the bell in one hand, the strut in the other.

The figure raised its head.

And Fenna saw that it wasn't clinking.

Not Siv.

Not Tilo.

It was someone she hadn't expected to be there, because he didn't belong. Because he wasn't one of those characters you'd find in a blizzard, unless you were stuck in a fairy tale.

It was Malrik Splitterbart.

Not as a silhouette.

Not as a mask.

Real.

Paler than snow.

Her lips were blue from the cold.

Eyes half open.

And there was no calculation in his gaze.

Just the naked, furious survival of a being that is just realizing that "letting go" is not romantic, but cold.

Fenna stopped.

The storm howled.

Malrik blinked slowly.

And whispered, barely audible, as if he had no more strength than for one sentence:

"You... again."

## imprint

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