

Lofoten, Northern Norway, October 1923

In my heart, I have always pitied those who think of the sky as blue. I have heard that there are lands in the south where the sky is always a pale summer blue, just like in the picture books, only fading to a dull grey on rainy days and an empty black at night. But here in the north, in the long polar nights, the sky blazes with all its true, glorious colors: As soon as the daylight dies, the polar lights illuminate the heavens with clouds of deep purple, scarlet and indigo, burning gold and iridescent green. And those of us who grow up in the north, under the jewel-bright winter sky, gaze up at the swirls of color that light up the darkness and dream of impossible things until winter's end.

I pressed my face to the window of our cottage, watching the northern lights dance in the rising autumn storm. The wind that blew in from the ocean was an old wind; I could feel it in my bones. It made me think of tales of spectral ships and otherworldly crews, and I wondered if my father might not be somewhere out there after all.

My mother glanced up from her knitting. "What are you doing by the drafty window, Finn? It's too dark to see anything out there."

"That doesn't mean that I can't look, Mother." I felt like I had to say it, even if I knew perfectly well that my mother would never understand how someone could spend time looking at something they can't see. I listened to the low murmur of the sea and the sharper, closer sound of the wind twisting through the apple trees outside, whipping the branches against the window.

"The winds are getting strong," said my mother. "You did tie the boat properly to the dock, didn't you?"

"Of course." I peered out of the window again, trying to make out the shapes of the familiar trees and our small dock against the drifting colors of the night sky. "I don't know if the moorings will hold, though, on a night like this. We will be lucky if the dock is there in the morning, let alone the boat." My breath misted the darkened windowpane. "If the dock blows away, maybe I'll stay home and build you a new one this winter, Mother, instead of working in the general store with Mr. Jensen. I don't think he'll mind at all if Einar comes and works for him instead, even if he's only twelve. Einar has a much better head for numbers than I do anyway." Einar glanced absently up from his book, flushing with pleasure at the compliment.

But my mother laughed and shook her head. "So it's your prayers that we have to thank for this storm, then, Finn! No, dear, I'm afraid you still have to work for Mr. Jensen this winter, even if our entire house blows away. We need the money. And who knows, one of these days you might begin to enjoy working there. I think some of the young girls rather like it when you wait on them."

I bit back the sharp answer hovering on my tongue. Perhaps Einar would enjoy spending his time indoors, in the bright lamp-lit store, selling sugar and tinned meat and pale yellow hair ribbons to girls with pink cheeks and soft bird-like voices. I already knew that this was not the life I wanted. I had long since extracted the promise from my mother that I could take hire as a deckhand on the first ship that would take me. All summer long, I had lingered by the harbor, watching the polar ships as they came back from faraway places in the north like Svalbard and Murmansk, carrying valuable loads of grey-white seal skins and wooden vats of rich blubber and salted polar bear meat. Sometimes, the ships even carried trading goods from the Sami and the Samoyeds who lived at the far northern edge of the world: reindeer skins, walrus ivory, and sharp hunting daggers.