

THE FIRST FIRE

A novel — Chapter One of Fifty-Two.

Chapter One · The Stranger's Coat

The stranger arrived the way winter did — without warning, without apology, and carrying something none of us had asked for. He came down the mountain on foot in a coat the colour of wet iron, and the coat itself was the first thing about him we did not understand. There had not been iron in our valley for four generations, and the last man who wore anything like it had ridden out of Aldenhold on a horse the priests said was cursed. My grandmother spat on the ground for luck when she told that story and would not tell it twice.

He came at dusk. That, too, was wrong. Nothing came at dusk in our country except the wolves, and the wolves were far south this year, on account of the hunger. My uncle Rud saw him first and did not raise the horn. Rud is not a coward — Rud is the man who once walked eleven miles in a snowstorm with a broken foot to bring my mother to a midwife — but he did not raise the horn, and later that evening, when the whole council was arguing over it, Rud sat by the hearth and would not look at the fire. That was how I knew the stranger had said something to him before Rud let him past the gate.

The stranger did not eat. That, three, was wrong. He was offered bread — we still offer bread in Aldenhold when a traveller comes, even in a bad year, even to a stranger — and he took the loaf in both hands the way a man takes a hymn book, and he set it down again untouched. He drank water only after the elder had drunk from the same cup first, and then he drank the whole cup slowly, holding it in both hands still, as though the cup might otherwise be taken from him. I remember thinking he did not look tired. He did not look tired the way a man coming off the mountain in October has no right not to look tired.

"You have come far," said the elder. He had come very far.

"You have come from the north," said the elder. He had not come from the north.

"You will stay the winter," said the elder — a courtesy, not a question. He would stay the winter. He would not, we would learn by the second month, stay a day longer than the winter, and he would take with him, when he went, three things my grandmother had kept in a cedar chest for fifty years, and one thing my grandmother had kept in her chest longer than any of us knew.

His name, he said, was Vell. It was not his name. We would learn that too, later, and we would not blame him for it, because by then we would understand — as I did not understand that first evening, though I have said, since, that I did — that a man walking down a mountain in October in a coat of wet iron does not owe you the truth of his name. He owes you only what he came to give. And Vell had come to give us fire.

I do not mean the fire in our hearth. That fire we already had. That fire had been in our valley for eleven hundred years, tended by the women of the elder's house and never once allowed to go out. If our fire went out, we did not need to be told, our valley would go with it. That was not a superstition. That was arithmetic. In Aldenhold at the top of the pass, in the year of the stranger, there were forty-two of us — thirty-eight adults and four children, the two Marden girls and my cousin Osric and me — and the winter was not planning to be short. We knew, all of us, what fire we still had.

What Vell had come to give us was the fire that had been kept from us. I would not know that for eleven days. But he had come to give it, and by the sixty-first day of his staying, we would have it, and by the ninetieth day the priests of the southern city would ride into our valley and demand it back, and by the ninety-second day my grandmother would be dead, and by the winter after that, Aldenhold would burn — burn honestly, burn on purpose, burn from the hearth outward, because we would understand, by then, what our fire had been for, and we would refuse to let anyone else keep it.

But on the first night, we did not know any of that. We knew only that a stranger had come down our mountain, that our uncle had let him past our gate, and that our elder had offered him our winter. And I remember the moment, sitting on the bench beside my mother, when the stranger — this man in the coat of wet iron whose name was not Vell — looked up from the untouched loaf in his hands, looked past our elder, looked past our fire, and looked at me. I was nine years old. I was the smallest person in that room. And he looked at me the way a man looks at the person he has come, specifically, to find.

That was how the first fire began.

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