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Chapter 1

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It seemed precarious; the way the sun hung in the sky just over the horizon, dancing across the tops of the mountains and throwing off shades of pink and amber in her long summer dance. There wasn't much between her and Lintukoto, the land where the birds dwelt for the long night. *Beaivi*, in all her brilliance, was fleeting - and that long darkness that lay behind her curtain of truth and life would soon give way to the wandering path of the stars for the remainder of the year.

In the base of the mountain pass, Cappaivvaš sparkled with the glow of fires in lanterns that hung from poles scattered between the village homes. The homes, usually the earthy cedar and vibrant green of the summer moss, had been blended over with the recent

snowfall. A few homes buzzes with the blue light of the *elektrici*; for most, it was a modern luxury that most had not relented to yet, but the appeal was growing daily as the autumn sky darkened towards winter.

Near the center of town, a small girl stomped across the packed snow of the village, old enough to let wander without fear, but young enough to do so unbridled curiosity. Her fur hood was drawn tight around her short auburn braids, and the soles of her leather boots left barely a trace in the snow as she marched away from her dwelling.

A figure approached the small girl at an easy pace, indigo garments a dark shape against the pale pink of the snow. Like the girl, the figure had auburn hair that spiraled down from the ear flaps of her white fur cap.

“Áire! Please do not wander, your father will be here soon.”

The girl stopped and peered up at her mother. The glow of a nearby *elektrici* lamp shone against her eyes and she turned, momentarily distracted her once again. Her eyes didn't leave the lamp as her mother strode closer. “Momma,” she began, “*ahhku* says that if I whistle under them, then the *guovssahasat* will come down from the sky for me. Is that how *guovssahasat* got put in that box?”

“*Elektrici*,” Her mother enunciated, gently reaching to grab her daughter's hand. Her mother walked Áire softly across the path to the lanterned pole, and showed her the lamp above. The blue light flickered and danced in the woman's eyes, which were unlike her daughters with their dark hue. “This is Man's *guovssahasat* - it is not the fires in the sky. It is something we create, not something captured.”

The girl furrowed her eyebrows and clutched at the red tassels on her gown, biting down on her lip. Though curious like most children her age, she was not easily convinced. “Hmmm.”

Before she could consider protesting further, three other figures approached out of the series of mounds that marked the village houses. They were dressed similarly to the woman and her child, in a deep purple with vibrant red patterns complete with furs and reindeer hide to protect against the biting cold of the evening chill.

“I do not know how things work in Karhula, but we are happy to welcome the southerners to our village,” the fair-haired man in the front was saying, “We have had our share of disagreements with the Crown, but also our share of compromises. We pay their land tax, and they leave us with our herds in peace, and give us access to the innovations of the south.”

The tall, bearded man to his left stopped in the snow under the *elektrici* glow, the blue light giving his face a gaunt and drawn-out look. “That is easy for Cappaivvaš to say. The Finns are no threat. You do not have the *ruoššas*, with their *bissu* that take the lives of our reindeer with metal through their flesh - you do not have them breathing down the necks of your shamans.”

Slowly, patiently, the aurora blazed to life above the village and the small congregation of men who stood arguing under the wooden lamp post. The third man, the shorter of the three, was yet to speak. He looked at his shoes. “Please, gentlemen,” he murmured, “do not argue under the *guovssahasat*.”

It did little to quell the mounting argument between the other two men. “Feles, surely you can speak to the *ruošša* men,” said the fair-haired man, “they understand some of our language - ”

“They don’t have the patience or the care,” Feles snarled, “they come to our village with their *Ipmil*, their one God, and they watch *our* rites and *our* songs and call us devils -”

“Talk to them! Request that they take council with your elders. Ask your *noaidi* for the wisdom of your fathers. We’ve learned to live at peace with the Crown, however uneasy, and I’m sure we can talk to these *ruoššas*.”

The shorter man gave a quiet laugh. “That is the problem. Not even the Crowned Finns want to deal with the *ruošša* threat.”

The bearded man - the visitor from Karhula - looked from the blonde man back to his companion, waiting for a response. Finally, the blonde man spoke, “It does not matter. I’ll do it - I will, Dárjá, you know it to be true - ” the short man avoided his gaze, “I’ll speak for Cappaivvaš and Karhula and all of our sister villages. I will go to Helsinki if I have to.”

His companion shook his head solemnly, an uncomfortable expression written on his face. “You forfeited your right to speak for the Sami when you married, Heikki.”

The comment dropped the trio into silence; the aurora whispered and flickered in the sky above.

When the fair-haired man spoke, his voice was hoarse and low. “Sonjá has never done anything to harm our village.”

“Yes, but how does your mother feel, knowing that Cappaivvaš lost their next *noaidi* to union with a southerner? What will you tell your daughter?” The bearded man was

raising his voice again, “That you were forbidden from your *noaidi* rights, that you gave up your people’s connection to the spirits for a southern whore - ”

He stopped, abruptly. The lights above flickered and scattered, casting the trio into an indigo shadow. There came a distant giggling from far down the path, as the small child played a game of chase with her mother around a partially saddled reindeer. Heikki eyes were piercing as he met Feles’s gaze, daring him to speak further.

There was only silence, until the shorter man relented. “We will continue this discussion at the next Council meeting.” His words were low but not unkind, and his eyes held sympathy for Heikki, and weariness for Feles. The councilman from Karhula gave a curt nod, and strode off across the packed snow.

“I’m sorry I said that, Heikki.”

“No,” Heikki said, adjusting the fur flaps around his ears, “even if you don’t feel that way, Dárjá, that sentiment speaks for the rest of the village.”

The short man clapped Heikki on the shoulder. “Take care tonight, and good cheer to Áire for her Awakening.” And with that he set off, leaving Heikki alone under the street lamps, staring back into the town center and the hovering sun. Readjusting the sleeves of his *gátki*, Heikki turned in the snow and set off towards his wife and daughter, who were playing near the mount of snow and lumber that marked their home.

“Heikki,” his wife said as he approached, Áire quiet and thoughtful at her side, “how did the meeting go?”

The man smiled and bent to kiss child on the forehead before delivering a soft kiss to his wife. “Ah, Sonjá,” He removed the fur from around his head. With his cap off, the

winter chill made his pale cheeks fill with a pale rosy glow that filled his face with the appearance of a constant joy. “Let’s just say that I’m just happy it’s over.”

His wife returned a more subtle smile, and glanced down at Áire, who seemed enraptured with the crystal snowflakes falling around the blue glow of the lamp above her. “Winter preparations not going as planned?”

Heikki, nodded and reached for his wife’s hand. “That was some of it - the rest, politics. The *ruoššas* and the southerners have given Karhula a tough time. You know best how skeptical the eastern villagers can be, but they are coming around, just like Cappaivvaš.”

“To the *elektrici* maybe, and our boats and machines and fabric,” she murmured, eyes still down cast down at her daughter, “but not to me, and certainly not to Áire.”

Heikki brought his wife’s hand up to his face and pressed it to his lips. “She is not yet part of our village. After tonight, she will be welcome as one, as was I after my Awakening. I am sure of it. She will be just like her *ahhku* with the light of *Beaivi* in her.”

Áire continued to stare up at the snowflakes as they floated down onto her lashes. She kept herself busy, as she always did around her parents - examining the *elektrici* and falling snow and tugging at her *gátki* - but like all children, she was listening.



The trip to the village’s *sieidis* was not a long one, but it was not direct; the trek took them away from the riverside dwellings on the path that hugged the mountain, and through the pass lined with walls of ancient fir trees. Skuas flocked from branch to branch,

twittering and ruffling the snow from the topmost branches as they sailed through the woods above the travelers' heads in the still twilight air. *Beaivi* continued to flutter just above the horizon, but as the family rounded through the ancient stones that dappled the forest, she disappeared momentarily behind the taller peaks of the surrounding mountains.

Finally, just as the the edge of *Beaivi's* amber disk began to permanently disappear, they had arrived at the *sieidis*.

The *sieidis* stood as a monolithic stone structure - it was natural, and in that robust state it was closer to the gods than Man could ever hope to be; it was covered in lichen and deep, dyed glyphs that depicted the histories and stories of the Sami people. Both Sonjá's and Heikki's eyes glanced along the walls as the three entered the cavernous structure. Heikki's gaze was familiar; Sonjá's, wondrous. The light from the lantern they had brought caused the carved portraitures of animals and men to dance and waver.

Áire knocked her furred boots against each other as Sonjá set her down on the stone, unaware of the importance of her surrounding. Sonjá stepped back from the entrance to the *sieidis* with respect and a deep-rooted understanding that this was, in truth, Heikki's place.

Heikki reached down for Áire's hand in the dim light of the cavern and led her gently along the earthy stone towards a center dais. There against the farther reaches of the *sieidis* stood a stone bowl, unnatural in the smoothness of it's shape against the surrounding rocks. Heikki unclasped the outer furs around himself and his daughter. He removed the ornate *gákti* from her torso and her fur breeches, leaving her to stand in the light cloth tunic and pants that she wore to sleep. He dipped his hands into the basin and removed them, covered now in a jet black liquid that seemed dotted and shining with

thousands of stars. He seemed unsurprised - for he had once been on the other side of the rite.

Heikki took his paint-covered hand and began to carefully transcribe swirls and patterns across his daughter's arms, up her shoulders and to the base of her neck. The pattern was his family's - unique to the line of *noaidi* that had come before them - and it resembled the starlight path, the streaming light of incandescent dust from birds as they completed their journey to Lintukoto.

Finished with his mark, Heikki bent down to his knees and held Áire's hands in his. "Áire," he whispered, "remember what *ahhku* taught you, in your lessons." He reached to touch the locket around Áire's neck, a gift from her mother where she kept her grandmother's small portrait. Áire nodded, and removed the remaining clothing from her body. Despite the frigid outside temperature, the air inside the cavern was humid. The young girl glanced up over the dais and saw steam rising from a large pool deeper inside the cave, lit by light that streamed through the cracks in the cave ceiling.

Without speaking a word, she stepped out from next to her father and climbed back across the dais, towards the steaming pool that filled the expansive back of the cavern. From behind her came a low chant - her father's *joik*. It was the song he would sing to call upon the wisdom of their forefathers, the song that *ahhku* had taught him, and he sang it now despite the protest of his people. As she moved away from the entrance and her father, Áire felt the darkness close behind her; though she moved farther from her father's humming, it seemed only to grow in strength and reverberate through the cavern and into her bones. As she neared the edge of the water, Áire picked up her father's song in a voice clear and powerful.

The song took root in the walls of the cavern; the starred markings that had been painted across Áire's skin glowed in the darkness and were reflected in the pool around her. She stepped out, submersing herself until she was waist-deep in the scalding water, the stars swirling and rotating below the glass surface of the pool. Then, as the shining light of *Beaivi* flickered one last time through the cavern ceiling, the cave went completely dark.

And then the world erupted into song and light.

Áire felt a fire awaken somewhere deep behind her chest. The light from her skin shone out across the water and rebounded against the cavern walls, seeming to bring the cave's murals to life while the blazing aurora danced all around her.

The glyphs on the wall were no longer crude approximations of the animal form - they were real, and glowing; Reindeer galloped in herds across the iridescent paths of light, packs of wolves chased each other and rolled in falling starlight as mighty kites and eagles took flight across the rising steam. Tundra foxes circled around Áire's legs, and for a second she couldn't tell if she was in the cavern or one among the animals of the north. Emerald, violet, amber, and rose light danced with the sound of the *guovssahasat* crackling through the air. But the voices - voices rose above it all.

The song they sang had no words, but Áire understood it all - she realized, in that moment, that this was her birthright.

She isn't true Sami -

Heikki would have been the most talented shaman this village had ever seen -

Beaivi's chosen -

If only he had stayed through his rites -

The child is too young to understand the position she is in, surely ahhku must realize she can't make a noaide of a half-blood -

Áire remembered the words she had heard throughout her entire life and in that song, she drowned them out, with a power that was entirely her own.

Akkhu had not been wrong to take her as her apprentice.

With a slow smile spreading across her face, Áire threw her arms out wide and felt a crackling of energy warp around her motion, the lights dancing wildly across the surface of the water.

Suddenly, a figure in gold appeared through the light of the cave; she was distinct from the swirling aurorae around them, and she dwarfed Áire's starlit glow with her own golden fire. The woman turned to Áire with a smile, her flaming gown spinning at her ankles as she walked gracefully across the top of the pool.

Beaivi.

The mother-goddess; blazing like sunlight in the dark of the cavern.

The life-song dropped away and the crackling of of the *guovssahasat* faded from Áire's fingertips. She couldn't help but fall back a couple of steps, back towards the darkened entrance to the cave. The starlight animals scattered to dust across the waves as she stumbled against the lapping waves.

But *Bieavi* reached out her hand in offering, and Áire's fear was replaced with wonder. She couldn't help but clutch at the golden locket around her neck, away from the goddess's outstretched palm.

Beaivi did not withdraw her hand. “You doubt your place among your people,” it was stated as fact. “but you are young. And you have more claim to the *noaidi* power than you can clearly see now.”

Áire’s grip around the locket relaxed, but she continued to stare at the radiant figure before her, thoughtful. “I - me? Why me?”

Beaivi’s hair flickered like a dancing flame in the darkness of the cave. She glanced over Áire - a glance that pierced through the outer trappings of her body and seemed to peer straight into her being. “We are not so different, you and I,” the goddess said, “but where I cannot go into the realm of the living among your people, beyond this *sieidis*, you are free to walk the paths of the branches of the world-tree.

“You are a child of the worlds, Áire - not just of the spirit world. Your mother’s world is collapsing, and with it comes a threat to all peoples; as much as the Sami deny it, they cannot exist in isolation. You will hold the insight for bridging the gap in these worlds.”

Áire suddenly felt a chill go through her body despite the warmth of the sauna. For a brief, terrifying second, she began to think about the scope of the world beyond that which she knew. She thought of the *ruoššas* - she had only heard whispers of them, whispers amongst villagers and brief conversations around hearths as she entered the room. She had even seen one up close - a stranger with a hooded-expression and dark hair, with rounded eyes unlike those of the Sami. He had spoken with her parents; she remembered now, how he had grabbed her roughly by the arm and told her in crude Sami to sing for him.

“But my village doesn’t want to be involved with the outsiders. No one likes them,” said Áire, holding her voice steady, “No one likes the *ruoššas*, and no one likes my mother. They don’t mind me because I - I was raised Sami.” She thought about what the goddess had said and felt a swell of rising panic in her chest. “I can’t be the person you need to fix this. I’ve never even left my village. I can’t fix a world I’ve never seen.”

The overwhelming surge of emotion continued to rise behind Áire’s chest. She wanted her mother, or *ahhku*, or father - someone to come into the *sieidis* and lift her up out of the water and take her back to her home. Instead she stood alone, surrounded by darkness and the blinding light of her goddess.

But in that instance she remembered the way the *guovssahasat* had danced for her; she remembered, months ago, the *ruošša*’s outstretched hand and the way the *elektrici* of the lights had flickered above him, sparking his eyes with an unknown emotion - had it been wonder? Fear? She remembered the locket around her neck and the future she had as *ahhku*’s student, as *noaide*. She remembered the pride in her father’s face when he had walked away from the dais, and thought of his sacrifice for her and his service to the village.

And now Áire stood alone with the mother-goddess, but she was not afraid.

This was her Awakening.



Far to the east, in the village of Karhula, a young boy was walking with the spirits.

Rástoš's body-soul sat in the middle of the frozen lake; he was cross-legged, drum in lap, eyes closed and furs drawn around his body against the cold and the oncoming night. On the flip side of the ice, deep below the bottom of the lake, his free-soul walked with those of his ancestors.

And so it was that he, the true Rástoš, stood atop the rocky overhang that looked out a snow-dusted valley in the country of the dead, where a herd of white reindeer grazed for lichen in the distance. The young boy rolled up the sleeves of his *gákti* and smiled in the springtime sun.

“Ah, the bird was right. You do have a bit of the Storm about you,” said a voice behind him.

An old, coy looking woman had appeared on the overhang - she had a shock of white hair that was tucked up into the round fur cap on her head, and bright blue eyes against her tanned skin. Rástoš tried to place where he had seen her before. In his mind he thought of a mountain pass, a neighboring village not far from Karhula across the lake. “You’re the *noaidi* from Cappaivvaš, aren’t you? Everyone calls you *ahhku*.”

He could see why - she was ancient, her skin lined like tree bark - but he immediately felt a sense of calm in her presence, as though he were home. Upon seeing him staring, corner of Aahku’s mouth twitched upward at him, and Rástoš realized where they were. “Wait, we’re in the spirit world - you’re not - ”

“Oh no, I’m still alive,” she chuckling, “but judging by your expression, I must look older than the rocks themselves. You will be surprised to find yourself like that some day.”

“I uh - I didn't mean - I was just trying my first Walk with the spirits - ”

Ahhku placed both of her hands on the wooden staff before her. “Do not worry, I know you mean no offense. Where is your guide?”

Rástoš nodded and relaxed. His first time walking in the spirit world proved to be nothing like he had been expecting when he set off from Karhula earlier that morning. He had been expecting more mysticism, maybe some sort of macabre gloom - after all, this was the world of his ancestors, and they were dead.

But it was also where the *noaidi* came when they needed guidance, and the land where gods could pass freely with humans. Surely the gods would live somewhere beautiful. “How did you know I would be here?” he asked Ahhku.

“I was just here on an errand. *Sielulintu* told me you would be here.”

Rástoš gaped. *Sielulintu* was the soul bird - the guardian of the *noaidi* as they walked through dreams, though he usually only appeared to lead one out of the deeper parts of the spirit world. Rástoš had never before heard of the guide speaking directly to the shaman.

“We are of good history,” Ahhku said, as if reading his mind.

Rástoš could do nothing else but nod at his elder. “What type of errand requires that you come to the spirit world?”

Ahhku's face showed no change in expression. “A sickness has struck our village,” she told him, “I have come here to ask for guidance.”

The boy nodded, understanding. “Where are all of the spirits?” He asked, feeling naive.

A shadow passed over Ahhku's expression. “I was wondering that myself.”

She readjusted her grip on her walking stick and stood slowly, in the patient way of elders who took caution with their movements. She gazed out across the valley before her, which seemed to echo with a silence that had been augmented by the end of their conversation.

“You shouldn’t be here.”

Rástoš turned to the old woman in surprise. Her tone was sharp with concern; not unkind, but not welcoming. He felt a wave of anxiety bubble at the pit of his stomach. What had he done wrong?

“When a *noaidi* Walks, they always come through the bridge and are met with someone of their past. They put you up here, out of the way.” Her brows furrowed and she examined Rástoš shrewdly. Any trace of the coy expression on her face had disappeared.

The boy felt himself bristle despite himself, temper sparking. “I did everything right,” he said, “I sang the *joik*, I came with respect and offering - ”

Suddenly, there came a tremendous gust of wind from below the cliff face - Rástoš felt himself stumble backwards, but Ahhku stood firm, clutching her staff as her long white braids were whipped up around her. Her blue eyes blazed as a large, dark shape soared up from below and blocked out the sun above, swooping down over the figures on the mountainside. It was a tremendous bird, with wings nearly eight meters across, and its features glistened red-brown and emerald, with all of the hues of a springtime forest.

“*Sielulintu!*”

It seemed as though the floor of Rástoš’s dropped out from under him; the soul-bird was there, in front of him, soaring down towards the cliff where he stood. He could see the trail of the aurorae fall behind, tumbling in its wake.

There was another bird flying along beside it; smaller, but grappling with the god with an unmatched fury. As the two shapes blew past the cliffside where he and Ahhku stood, Rástoš could see the splatter of golden-ichor blood strewn across *Sielulintu*'s feathers.

The smaller bird ducked below its rival and pecked at its underside, dropping and tumbling and soaring furiously back up around the larger bird. As the fight raged above them, Rástoš got to see the attacker up close -

It was a double-headed eagle.

Ahhku saw it, too, and gasped aloud. It was a blur of bronze feathers, larger than any mortal bird, and it was attacking the Sami guardian with ceaseless aggression.

The birds raged in their fight, but it was clear that the demon was no match for *Sielulintu* - the guardian let out a rallying, piercing screech, and managed to knock the smaller bird through the air, sending it crashing and tumbling.

Sielulintu dove after without mercy, talons outstretched. The two-headed creature let out separate, strangled cries, but it was too late - it fell to *Sielulintu*'s grasp. The two birds screeched and tumbled, and aggressor was flung against the cliff face.

There was silence on the mountainside.

Sielulintu beat its wings slowly, hovering over the spot where the eagle had fallen, but struggling - yet there was no sound from the motion. The silence was piercing, unnatural; Rástoš was deafened by it. He could no longer hear even the sound of his heartbeat against his chest.

The guardian turned towards the onlookers and glided down to the cliffside, seeming to limp through the air. When it landed, it stood before Ahhku, feathers splattered with red and gold., head held high with pride.

You must return to your body-souls.

It wasn't spoken - it wasn't even a voice. The words, the very idea of the message itself had appeared within Rástoš's mind through the silence. He glanced towards Ahhku in alarm, but she was gazing up at the soul-bird in an intense silence. A moment or two passed with their eyes locked, the wind rustling the bird's feathers as it cocked its head left, then right, seeming in conversation.

Then, without warning, the bird's gaze flashed up to confront Rástoš.

You are the Storm-Born.

The boy felt his voice catch in his throat. "I - "

You must return to your body-souls.

"Thank you - " Ahhku looked back at the boy and moved with surprising speed for someone her age, "Rástoš, you must go, now - back to your village - they need you right now."

"I - I don't understand - "

And without warning, he was flung backwards; he tumbled through nothingness - away, far away - and back to his body, away to a world of night and darkness and fire.

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