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opening extract from

North Child

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PROLOGUE

I FOUND THE BOX IN THE ATTIC of an old farmhouse in Norway. It was large, the size of a footlocker, and there were markings on it; runes, I learned later.

When I opened the lid, it looked like the box contained mostly papers, a jumbled mass of them, in several different languages and written in different styles of handwriting. There were diaries, maps, even ships' logs.

As I dug deeper, under the papers, I found more: skeins of wool; small boots made of soft leather; sheaves of music tied with faded ribbon; long, thin pieces of wood with maplike markings on them; dried-up mushrooms; woven belts; even a dress the colour of the moon.

Then I came upon what looked to be the mouthpiece of a very old reed instrument. I held it up towards the light coming through the small attic window. As the late afternoon sun caught it, a most extraordinary thing happened. I heard the clear, high note of a flute.

And it was coming from inside the trunk.

Other sounds came then – whispering, muttering, swirling around inside my head. Dogs barking, sleigh bells, the cracking of ice. Voices. *Hearing voices – this isn't good,* I thought.

Still holding the ancient mouthpiece in the palm of my hand, I lifted the top piece of paper out of the trunk. It was a handwritten note.

They want me to write it all down, though I'm not sure why.

It seems enough that Father and Neddy wrote down their parts. Especially Neddy; he was always the storyteller in the family. I am not a storyteller, not really. It takes more patience than I've got – or rather, than I used to have. I guess I did learn a little bit about patience in the course of the journey. But even so, I'd much rather set the story down in cloth. Well, actually I have. Hangs on the north wall in the great room, and the whole story is there. But words are easier to understand for most people. So I will try.

It isn't easy for me to walk the path back to the beginning of the story, even to know where the true

beginning is. And telling a story, I suppose, is like winding a skein of spun yarn – you sometimes lose track of the beginning.

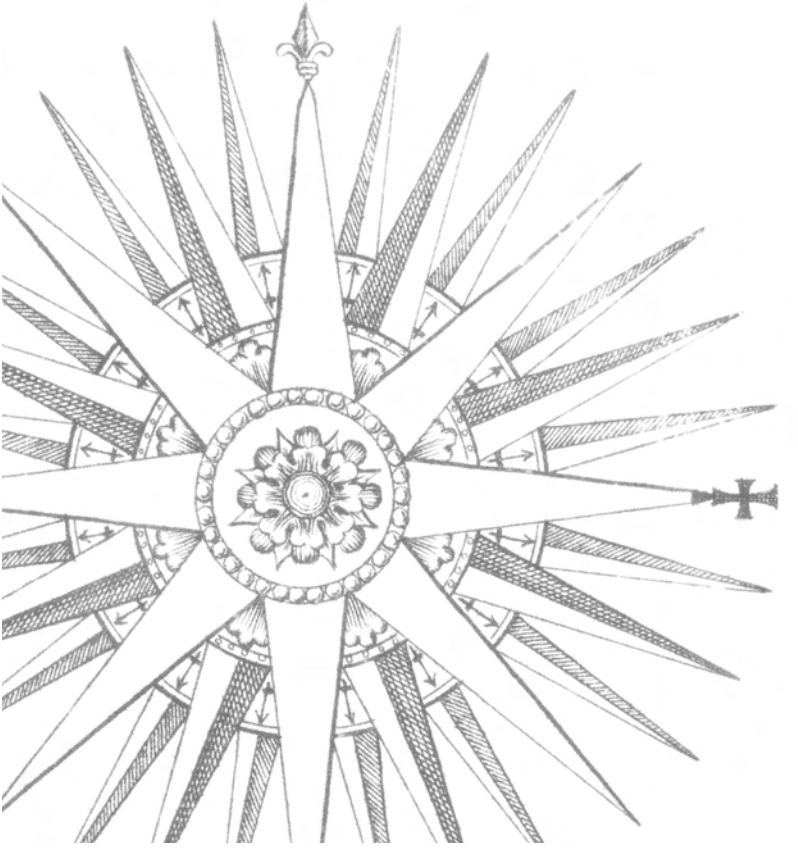
All I intended to do, when I began the journey, was to set things right. They say losing someone you love is like losing a part of your own body. An eye or a leg. But it is far worse – especially when it is your fault.

But already I'm getting ahead of myself. It all began with a pair of soft boots.

Book One

East

Once on a time there was a poor farmer with many children.



Father

EBBA ROSE WAS THE NAME of our last-born child. Except it was a lie. Her name should have been Nyamh Rose. But everyone called her Rose rather than Ebba, so the lie didn't matter. At least, that is what I told myself.

The Rose part of her name came from the symbol that lies at the centre of the wind rose – which is fitting because she was lodged at the very centre of my heart.

I loved each of her seven brothers and sisters, but I will admit there was always something that set Rose apart from the others. And it wasn't just the way she looked.

She was the hardest to know of my children, and that was because she would not stay still. Every time I held her as a

babe, she would look up at me, intent, smiling with her bright purple eyes. But soon, and always, those eyes would stray past my shoulder, seeking the window and what lay beyond.

Rose's first gift was a small pair of soft boots made of reindeer hide. They were brought by Torsk, a neighbour, and as he fastened them on Rose's tiny feet with his large calloused hands, I saw my wife, Eugenia, frown. She tried to hide it, turning her face away.

Torsk did not see the frown but looked up at us, beaming. He was a widower with grown sons and a gift for leatherwork. Eager to show off his handiwork and unmindful of the difficult circumstances of Eugenia's recent birthing, he had been the first to show up on our doorstep.

Most of our neighbours were well aware of how superstitious Eugenia was. They also knew that a baby's first gift was laden with meaning. But cheerful, large-handed Torsk paid no heed to this. He just gazed down at the small soft boots on Rose's feet and looked ready to burst with pride.

"The fit is good," he observed with a wide smile.

I nodded and then said, with a vague thought of warning him,"'Tis Rose's first gift."

His smile grew even wider. "Ah, this is good." Then a thought penetrated his head. "She will be a traveller, an explorer!" he said with enthusiasm. So he did know of the first-gift superstition after all.

This time Eugenia did not attempt to hide the frown that creased her face, and I tensed, fearing what she might say. Instead she reached down and straightened one of the boot ties.

"Thank you, neighbour Torsk," she said through stiff lips. Her voice was cold, and a puzzled look passed over the big man's face.

I stepped forwards and, muttering something about Eugenia still being weak, ushered Torsk to the door.

"Was there something wrong with the boots?" he asked, bewildered.

"No, no," I reassured him. "They are wonderful. Eugenia is tired, that is all. And you know mothers – they like to keep their babes close. She's not quite ready for the notion of little Rose wandering the countryside."

Nor would she ever be. Though I did not say that to neighbour Torsk.

That night after we had pried Neddy from Rose's basket and gotten all the children to sleep, Eugenia said to me, "Didn't Widow Hautzig bring over a crock of butter for the baby?"

"She was only returning what you loaned her," I said.

"No, it was for Ebba Rose. Her first gift, I'm quite sure." Her voice was definite.

Eugenia did like to keep her children close, but it turned out she wanted to keep Rose closest of all. And that had everything to do with the circumstances of Rose's birth.