Fia and the Last Snow Deer



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For my parents, Gregg and Shireen,
for never doubting the sun's return,
even when the snow was deep.

And for Kaeden –
the light that brought me home.




The Deer Mother speaks



Fia

Five days until solstice

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Sometimes
I forget what the sun looks like.
I can't recall the feel of grass beneath my toes and
even the taste of fresh blackberries
is something I can only find deep in my dreaming.
Asleep, it all comes back to me:
I hear the birds
and the lapping water on the lake shore,
I watch the shadows play beneath leaves
on trees still heavy
with summer.
In my dreams I remember it all:
summer finds me as I sleep curled
beneath the worn furs
huddled against the cold
that never leaves our waking world.

In my dreams it's always summer,
I am always warm,
always full.

But then,
Mother calls from the fireside,
Fia, it's late,
you've slept past midday
and your chores are still waiting.

She pokes the embers in the middle of our home to flame,
drawing a line in the dirt and waving a finger at my little brother.
No closer, love, you'll burn your toes.

My breath is cloudy, the cold worse this morning.
Three winter solstices
since we've seen the sun
and every day seems harsher,
colder than the one before.

When I was small,
winter was a time of quiet,
of holding still,
of rest.
A time for family and friends
to gather,
talk,
laugh,

tell stories of the spirits,
the gods and goddesses
that protect our land,
of sea creatures to the far south
and the evil shadows to the north.

But that was before,
when food
was taken for granted,
when the sun's return
was too.

I puff the chill in tiny clouds, my lips popping as I blow.
Mother frowns.

You look like old Gerd
sucking her pipe.
Off with you, Fia – Solas will be hungry.

I jump to my feet, bracing myself
for the first painful breath
that will reach my lungs once I step outside the warmth of our home.
The cold and grey hangs over us all,
day after day, so many we have lost count,
or at least that's what we say,

as if it doesn't matter.
Really,
we all know it's been three winter solstices
since we saw the sun.
That we all hope,
pray,
wish
the solstice in five days will alter that path.

I stomp out into the white flakes,
puff my cheeks again just to annoy my mother.
I look nothing like the shaman Gerd,
ancient, wrinkled, pot-bellied.
She may be my great-grandmother
but she was born old, I'm convinced of it.

My mood lightens as I near Solas' pen
and I hear the gentle grunts that greet me every day.
The last snow deer.

She's standing waiting for her feed,
sharp white against the dirty snow,
her coat bright in the dull day.
In our language her name means

Light
and she is mine.

She's family,
she's home,
she's my best friend.

Dreams of summer
clear from my mind
as I reach out to stroke her neck.
As long as Solas is here,
the light in the grey sky
seems a little brighter
and I can ignore my hunger
at least for a while.

She pushes her head against my arm, rooting through my furs
for bark offerings and moss.
I give her what little I have
and hope it's enough.

Some day,
I whisper in her ear,
the herds of snow deer will return with the sun.

The snow will melt,
the leaves will grow,
we will not be so hungry.

I kiss the swirled parting of hair
between her antlers,
fighting the nagging voice in the back of my mind,
whispering to me:

Don't be silly, Fia,
it's been so long since the sun returned,
since the snows melted.
Do you even remember
what leaves look like?