

Tómas clutched the tin of coins in his pocket to stop them clinking. He couldn't let anything spoil his plan now. He tried to sound casual. 'I'm going to fetch peat, if you must know. Move out of the way, won't you?'

But as soon as the door closed, he dashed away over the lava field. He knew Katla would be raging when she realised he had tricked her – and that she'd have to bring in the peat herself. But he couldn't help that. After everything, he couldn't risk missing the bus.

He felt anxious as he climbed aboard and paid his fare. But as he settled into his seat, he imagined Grandfather, in the yellow hat Grandmother had knitted him, pointing things out from the window, turning everything they saw into a story.

He took a deep breath of the jersey's salty smell and tried to sit straight and tall in his seat, just as Grandfather would have. He thought of the glittering shop windows, and all the presents he could buy. For Gréta, a rainbow of



new coloured pencils. For Teddi, a toy sword. For Mother, a bottle of perfume all the way from Paris . . .

It was noon by the time the pink sun rose, and Tómas saw the roofs of the city glinting ahead. He stared in amazement at the big construction sites by the side of the road, where dozens of new buildings were springing up out of nowhere.

But by the time he jumped down from the bus, he felt not just amazed, but confused. The city he'd visited with Grandfather had changed. Everything seemed so different now – no longer glittering and bright, but instead noisy and rough and strange. Motor cars roared by on the streets, making him jump. Dirty snow was heaped on the pavements, and smartly dressed women picked their way through it in high-heeled shoes. There were groups of soldiers everywhere; horns honked and engines growled – and sometimes even a plane roared overhead.

Tómas went uncertainly among the crowds, trying to remember the way to the shopping streets. After a time, he found the right way, and his heart began to bump with excitement as he recognised some of the big shops he'd visited with Grandfather. But as he went along the street, his excitement faded. Where were the bright displays of toys and fancy chocolates he remembered? The windows of the shops were almost empty – not looking festive at all, only drab and dull.

Perhaps there would be more to see inside? Gathering all his courage, he pushed open a door and went up to the counter.



'Excuse me,' he said to the assistant. 'Can you show me where the toys are? I'm looking for a present for my brother.'

But the assistant shook her head. 'I'm afraid we're rather short of toys just now,' she said.

It was the same in every shop he visited. At the grocer's, there were no bright oranges. At the stationer's, there were no coloured pencils. At the chemist's, there were no perfumes from Paris.

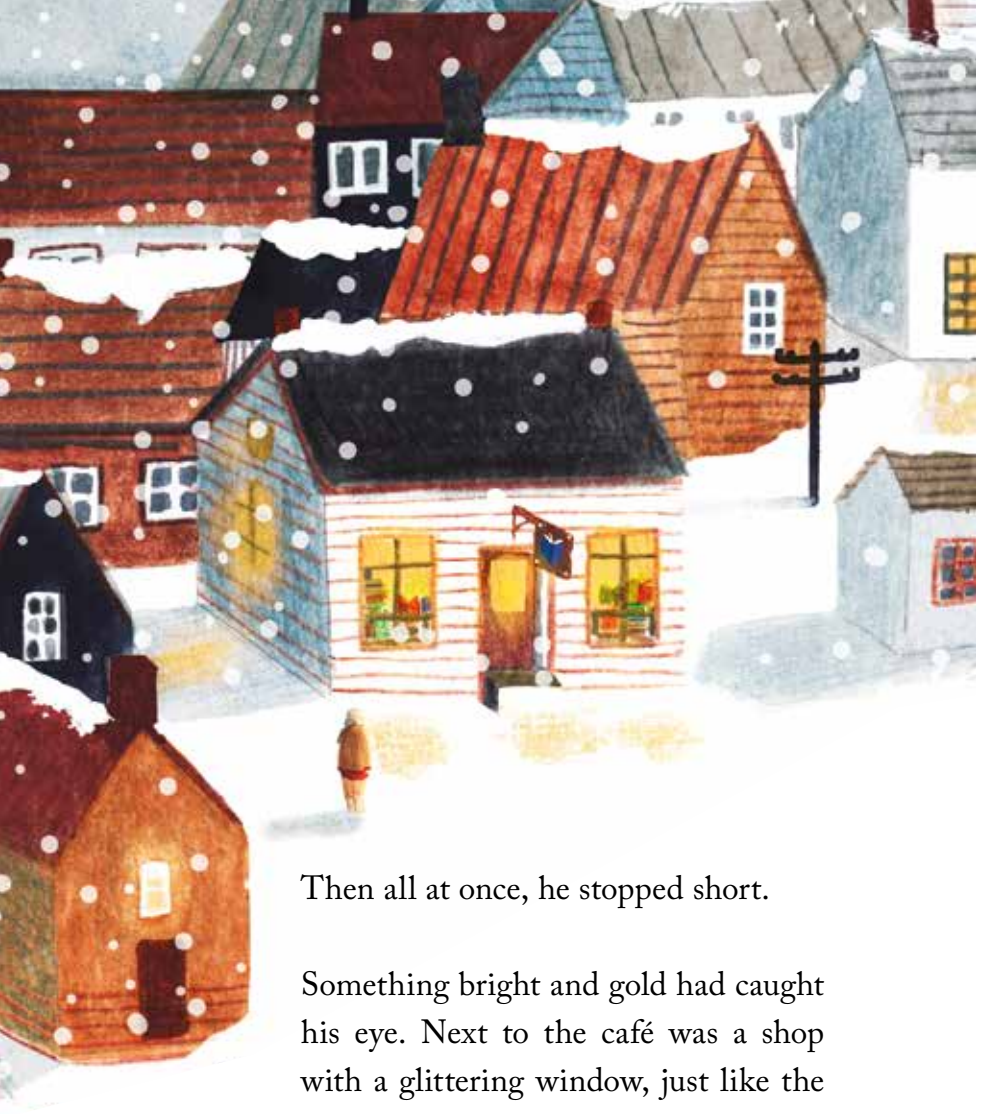
'It's all because of the war,' one shop assistant explained. 'We used to ship these kinds of things from abroad, but now – well! It's just too dangerous for the boats to get through.'



Tómas's heart plummeted. Perhaps he could at least buy a big box of chocolates for everyone to share? But he soon discovered that even boxes of chocolates were nowhere to be found.

Grimly, he went on through the dirty snow. He'd almost come to the end of the shopping streets. He'd been everywhere he could think of, but he still did not have a single parcel. The tin of coins weighed heavily in his pocket – and his heart was heavy too.

Already it was growing dark, and some shops were closing. He knew it would not be long until he would have to get the motor bus home empty-handed. He trudged down another street, past a church and a café with steamy windows.



Then all at once, he stopped short.

Something bright and gold had caught his eye. Next to the café was a shop with a glittering window, just like the ones he remembered. He blinked at it in disbelief.

The window was filled with books: books in every colour and shape and size. In the very centre was a book with a bright green cover, printed with shining gold letters. Its title read *Old Norse Tales: Asgard and the Gods*. In the dark of the midwinter afternoon, it glowed as brightly as an advent candle flame.

Tómas rushed to the shop door, half afraid it was magic – an illusion that would fade in an instant. Inside, he stopped in his tracks and stared.

All around him were shelves stretching from floor to ceiling – and every one of them was filled with books. There were more books than he had ever dreamed of: story books, poetry books, song books. Books in more languages than he had known existed. Books of maps, books of animals and trees, books of oceans and stars.

