

NICHOLAS

THE FANTASTIC ORIGIN OF *Santa Claus*



CODY W URBAN



After a betrayal and a stolen love, an average Roman soldier takes a path of revenge by igniting hope in the people to revolt against a corrupt governor, fulfilling his destiny to become the saint we now know as Santa Claus. Nicholas: The Fantastic Origin of Santa Claus is the epic adventure story of many Christmas tradition origins and the tale of a selfless hero who fought for children in the name of love.

Nicholas

The Fantastic Origin of Santa Claus

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❧ N I C H O L A S ❧
The Fantastic Origin of Santa Claus

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❧ Chapter One ❧

Do You Hear What I Hear?

*Said the night wind to the little lamb,
"Do you hear what I hear?"*

Cold, steel-blue shafts of light broke through the dappled pine needles to shine down on the gleaming hilt of a polished Roman sword. The foil stood upright in the earth, and tied to the hilt, listlessly swaying in the gentle breeze, blew a red ribbon. The year was what would later be reckoned as 292 Anno Domini, though that calendar was yet to exist. Anno Domini, Latin for "Year of Our Lord," had no meaning for the Roman Empire during the terrible reign of the Emperor Diocletian. However, those whom he oppressed kept a count—it was roughly three centuries since the birth of Christ.

The sword stood in stiff frozen dirt near the Danube River, where the northernmost limit of the Empire lay. The "Barbarians,"—as the arrogant Romans called them—were quite adept at holding their territory right along that pivotal river.

A leather-gloved hand split through the cold air to clutch the hilt, drew the blade from the frosty earth, and swung it up into a clash with another blade. Nicholas, a twenty year-old soldier, fought rigorously against the stronger more experienced legionnaire, Lysander. Visible puffs of steam rose in the frigid air from their mouths and their brows dripped

with sweat. Nicholas thought the sweat might turn to beads of ice before they hit the dirt. However, his typically introverted thinking caused what happened next: in the midst of their brawl, Nicholas tripped over a small root protruding from the frosty soil.

As Nicholas fell into the sward, the icy organic mat of grass, roots, and leaves, the hilt of his sword flew just out of his fingers' reach, and Lysander's blade came sweeping down toward his throat. It didn't strike him, of course—they were friends. "Slain," Lysander grunted and stepped back to gather his composure and wipe clean his sweaty brow. "One ought to heed previous tutoring, Nicholas. Watch your feet, they are meant to befriend you rather than betray you."

Nicholas stared up at the champion with eyes nearly revealing his heart's envy. At once he reprimanded himself, he knew better than to commit such a deadly sin as envy—so he labeled it admiration instead.

This is Nicholas: Born in the small town of Patara in the land of Lycia; once governed by Greece and now a melting pot of cultures during Roman reign, Nicholas grew up under his two wealthy parents. Nicholas's father was Epiphaneos and his mother, Nonna. Both were devout Christians. During his early years, he lived a carefree life until an accident robbed him of his brothers and the tyranny of the religiously intolerant Empire stole his parents. It wasn't long afterward when the traumatized wealthy orphan found himself in the custody of his uncle, the Bishop of Patara, for whom he had been named after. Uncle Nicholas raised the lad to be a clergyman, and structured his life under fastidiously pious guidelines expected of a priest in training.

After years of learning scriptures, myriad languages, and serving those in need, he met a young girl who stole his heart,

Nysa. She could be described as a fair maiden lost in a dark cruel world. Nicholas only wanted for her to be protected and for he to be her protector. She was like a drug to him, intoxicating in a way that effectively dissolved any possibility of a vow of chastity. Somehow he remained chaste. However, he broke ties with his Uncle and the church to start a new life. In addition to that motivation something nagged at him from within to break free of Lycia and to discover the larger world. His naïve goal was to earn an income, return a conquering hero who would sweep Nysa off her feet, and marry her to live happily until his final breath.

So he abandoned all ties to his prospective destiny as a priest and blindly joined the very force that had killed his parents—the Roman Army. He figured that to try fighting them would be an inevitable defeat so he would forge for himself a new destiny. However, his adolescent rebellion left him in a quandary; he had no training as a fighter. After recruitment, he made his way into the office of Quartermaster and was made responsible for ensuring that his brothers-in-arms were adequately equipped. It just so happened that the war had decimated his company so severely that in the upcoming battle his commanders would surely call upon him to take up his sword for the cause of expanding Roman rule. He would have to fight and help his company cross the Danube River. Unfortunately, he still did not possess the caliber of courage needed by a legionnaire.

Lysander reached out his hand and helped Nicholas to his feet. As Nicholas stood and straightened his gear, he said in jest, “Be proud, Lysander. For it wasn’t a soldier you bested, but a simple Quartermaster.”

Lysander stretched and stepped back. “Aye,” he began to say as he stooped down to pick up Nicholas’s sword, “too

many of our ranks have fallen. All will be required to finally expand the territory." He paused and looked at Nicholas's shining sword, taking note of the ribbon fixed to the hilt and then parroted without emotion the legionnaire's dictum, "In the name of Rome, the northern barbarians must fall."

Lysander tossed the sword back to Nicholas who caught it in mid air and said, "Therefore," as he cracked his neck and took a stance ready for another skirmish. "Let us have at it again!"

Taking Lysander by surprise, the two began to duel once again, and Lysander the valiant veteran held his ground with ease. Although tired and cold, Nicholas struggled to mask his weakness. Lysander did what he could to train and strengthen his friend, to ready him for the heat of the coming battle.

This is Lysander: A fun-loving Greek from Myra, which was a bustling harbor city in southern Lycia. The fact that he and Nicholas both came from Lycia prompted the two polar opposites to become devoted friends. While only three years older than Nicholas, Lysander had been through too many ambitious battles to number. He was born to prosperous parents devoted to the "grand old Empire" who instilled in him the need for honor and the requirement to serve and fight for the glory of Rome. He believed it would be the best way to bring honor to his name and to his family. So, he had worked his body to become a muscular killing force, adept at many arts of modern warfare. He could have modeled for a chiseled statue of Greek physical perfection, and he knew it. He enjoyed the envy of the crowds, especially women, wherever he went. Fame and fortune were his rewards for his devotion to the glory of Rome. In short, he was everything Nicholas hoped to be.

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Despite all that, deep down, Lysander longed for something more ... something meaningful out of life. Though the legion and his kin told him that he had achieved honor and continued to elevate his status, his heart whispered that his definition of honor was erroneous. People like Nicholas helped him catch glimpses of that missing element of his heart.

Not only Nicholas, but also the exquisitely unique Deborah, a woman he had rescued from a thief in Myra. She had the ability not to fall for his seductive charms unlike other women he had met, and it drove him mad. Getting to know her afterward, he discovered that she was one of those Christians – the outcasts who always seemed posed at the brink of rebellion against the Sovereignty. But did he judge her? No. Typically he would look down his nose at such strangers. However, with Deborah, there was something he could never condemn, even if he wanted.

So, now he fought for her. To prove to her that Rome was a glorious society that, through force of war, would bring peace and prosperity, and unity among all the nations under the great banner of Rome. He would valiantly fight for the glory of the nation, to change her mind, win her heart and hopefully find the elusive secret meaning of the word “honor.”

Lysander admirably fought Nicholas with the intention to harden him and increase his skills with a blade. Although Nicholas slowly improved, had he been an opponent on the battlefield, he was nothing more than a knave Lysander would simply dispatch in seconds while charging toward a greater foe more worthy of his efforts and skill.

With needle sharp focus on his goal, Lysander chose to demonstrate to Nicholas how pathetic his skills were and how badly he needed to shape up. He demonstrated this by dodging a strike, pinning his opponent’s sword down with his

own, stepping on Nicholas's toes, and elbowing him across the cheek. Needless to say, Nicholas was stunned, faltered and stumbled back to almost fall again. A blow like that in the chilling air felt like a knife stroke in itself. The two sighed and heaved, Nicholas ashamed and trying not to show his exhaustion.

To his further dismay, Nicholas discovered soldiers had gathered around to watch Lysander, the champion, effortlessly dispatch another challenger. Miles and Cordus, two mounted soldiers, stopped their horses to watch the spectacle and couldn't help but comment. "Waste not your time, Lysander," said Miles. "You'd have better fortune teaching an ass to wield a blade than our quartermaster."

"You're next then?" Lysander replied with a crooked smile.

Seizing the opportunity for posterity, the plucky Nicholas added, "Quite right. When I've finished with Lysander, I'll gladly best you as well, Miles."

"Best me? Not in this lifetime. I'd less easily slay a maimed doe!" Miles responded with a chuckle.

"Prove it. Care to meet your blade to mine?" Nicholas asked seriously. Though it publicly gained him some credit, he hoped within that his masculine façade would not make Miles another opponent. Deep within he felt this was too trivial and he shouldn't even care about it, however, he gave little mind to that innermost voice when so many strong males watched him.

"No, thank you, my skills are set. I'll save my strength for *worthy* opponents," Miles guffawed.

Cordus finally chimed in with a chortle, "He means to say he's too cold to fight." This broke the tension as he intended and soon all the shivering men were laughing.

Miles, enjoying the amusement, still felt the need to punch him in the arm. "Oh, you're just as frozen as the lot of us," he

said. "Assuredly, my parts are as shriveled as your grandmother's bosom!"

They all laughed again and the tension faded like a vapor in a strong wind. Soldiers need camaraderie. When enemies could be lurking nearby and the great precipice of the next battle dwells on the ever-nearing horizon, they need to joke, laugh, and tease to maintain that spark of their humanity. It was a delight to Nicholas, who had always felt like an observer all his life; to watch as people enjoyed the precious gift of life. Of course it was all the better when he was actually included in the jocularity.

However, the tension returned like the next wave crashing against a shore as their commander, Flavius Constantine, galloped toward them shouting, "Hear, ye laughing children," and pulled his horse to a trot circling them. If Lysander was the epitome of the Greek ideal of male perfection, Flavius was a model that artists could use when sculpting the gods. His firm jaw and dark piercing eyes were the countenance of royalty and leadership. While Nicholas admired his friend Lysander, Flavius stood on a pedestal even higher, almost but not quite, at the level worthy of worship. Though a man who understood propriety, Nicholas also grew up on stories of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who refused to bow before Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon and he would never allow his admiration to reach the level of worship. His devotion to Flavius bordered on such a stature.

"Quartermaster," Flavius addressed Nicholas, "gear the men, everyone, post haste. Scouts have seen the barbarians not far off."

"Aye, sir!" Nicholas replied, standing tall and proud.

"Men, we soon ride to war and the glorious expansion of Rome!" Flavius shouted as he rode off, quickly followed by his officers and elite guards.

Miles and Cordus promptly departed but Lysander remained gazing at Nicholas, watching the gravity of Flavius' words sink deep into his friend's awareness. Now that his very life was at stake, Nicholas considered himself a fool for joining the legion and seeing only the *end* he desired without truly weighing the cost of the *means* to achieve it. The end of returning home to Nysa as a triumphant hero, handsomely rewarded for his service to the Empire was all he saw when sailing out of Myra only a few months ago.

Now, he had witnessed a number of battles in which men whom he knew and had shared solidarity went into battle and never returned. He had seen bloodshed and savage bestial conflicts all over the ownership of a hunk of ground. He didn't think much of politics and even less of warfare. Yet, somehow, like swimming too far from shore and suddenly becoming aware that a current has gripped you and carried you away from the coast, he found himself putting his life at risk in the name a political purpose in which he did not believe in.

"'Tis an ill fate, to choose to serve the Empire and be called upon to slay men," Nicholas sighed. His words, spoken without forethought, revealed his innermost conundrum; he was not a coward. It wasn't his own death he feared, but the killing of others. With the death of everyone dear to him, he had learned that life was such a priceless gift. As an ornament made of thin glass so easily shattered, life was so very precious. His heart sank lower as he truly understood for the first time that the death he feared was the death of fellow human beings.

"Be of good cheer, Nicholas," Lysander said as he patted his friend's shoulder and began to walk him toward the storage tents. "By the setting of the sun, all that matters is how you have fought for right."

This confidence builder might have cheered Nicholas, but in his heart of hearts, where the religious child still lived,

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Lysander was a heathen. What was right to him may not be truly appropriate. Yes, he had felt the strength and courage that came from fighting for the right.

When he was still young, he saw an adult man wickedly take a loaf of bread from a little girl. He begged his father all day for a loaf of bread, and finally when he succumbed to the nagging, Nicholas ran back into the square and searched until he found the little girl. She clutched her mother's skirt as she wove a tapestry, pale, dirty faced, and clearly malnourished. When young Nicholas gave the bread to the little girl and undid the wicked man's heinous act, he felt that he triumphed over evil. He fought for what was good. Later, when he saw the same little girl steal a loaf from that same wicked man, he took it away from her violently and returned it to its owner. Little Nicholas learned that the man probably took it from her the first time because she stole it from him in the first place. So what was right? What was the "right" he would fight for that would fill him with courage and strength?

2

*A song, a song, high above the trees
With a voice as deep as the seas.*

After passing out the armaments: swords, knives, arrows and other gear to a plethora of grim-faced Roman soldiers, it was time to make himself battle-ready. No matter what he deeply wanted, the inevitable could not be postponed. He fitted himself with a fresh pair of braccæ, woolen trousers worn under his apron of leather strips, and fastened his military belt about his waist. He sheathed dagger and sword, grabbed a shield, strapped on his helmet, and tied his Roman red cloak to his shoulders. Though he now looked the part of the gallant hero, he would need to muster up the spirit to

Cody W Urban

properly feign the part of a warrior. Despite ardent attempts to focus on the coming battle, his mind relentlessly strayed to recall his last parting from Nysa on a day that seemed an eternity ago.

Nicholas had just returned from a six-month excursion to Syria and was perfectly ready for some free time with his beloved. When they embraced at the foot of the gangway, Nysa whispered in his ear, "God knows how I have missed you, my love." Time seemed to stop in that moment—or did it speed up and make them like chronically still marble statues? Fishermen and sailors pushed around them to attend to their business, but Nicholas and Nysa paid them no mind. This was their moment.

"And only God knows how much I have missed you, my Nysa," Nicholas whispered in reply and pulled her in for a deep kiss.

This was Nysa: A Mediterranean flower that blossoms bright, beautiful, and fragrant in the warmth and light, but is easily wilted with just the slightest cold or darkness. She owns the sad tale of a young girl with an abusive father. Her mother died at a young age, and with no sibling support, Nysa was expected to carry on the household duties for her father. He succumbed to depression and if he wasn't working the docks, he was working his way through pitchers of wine.

One day, after her father had given her a scant amount of money, she used it all to buy what little goat cheese she could afford. After her father stayed out late drinking through the night and into the morning, her hunger talked her into consuming the entire supply of cheese. Her fight against

starvation resulted in a black eye and bruised limbs as her drunkard father took his rage against the world out on her.

Nysa opted to end her life and would have done so if Nicholas had not arrived to save her. He was, and has always been, her hero, the champion of her heart, her personal Achilles. She knew he didn't think much of himself but she loved his genuine modesty as much as she liked to poke fun at it. In her eyes, Nicholas abandoned all for her. She knew he would die for her. He was the first and only man she could trust. Although the years had been kind to her physique, a quality that many men lustfully noticed, she could trust that Nicholas truly loved her for who she was. She would wait for him, always.

Only a short time after arriving in port, Nicholas and Nysa found themselves in the office of Vasilis, the Governor of Lycia. Speaking in an ingratiating voice, he said, "Nicholas! Nicholas, m'boy!" He found Vasilis to be an odd fellow. He walked as one with high esteem, coifed regal clothing, smart speech, and yet lacked that intangible quality of royalty.

He had long dark hair and his natural facial expression was a scowl, though he knew how to cover it with a smile when it would benefit him. As he approached Nicholas and Nysa, this was one of those times he feigned amusement. He had somehow taken notice of Nicholas, the son of the wealthy parents, who turned priest-in-training and later turned again to Roman soldier. Nicholas was to Vasilis, as he was to himself, an enigma, a man whose inner compass seldom pointed north, or even where one expected it to point.

He saw Nicholas as a simpleton trying to find his way in a chaotic world. What had initially attracted his eye was not the man himself, but the one who held his arm, Nysa. Oh, how he

wanted her. Just to be near her, he would repeat feigning to be a fatherly-figure to Nicholas—an act becoming all too frequent.

“Not a moment’s peace, for pity’s sake,” Nysa sighed heavily into Nicholas’s ear. It wasn’t that she disliked Vasilis, though he did find a way to make her a bit ill at ease, she wanted time unaccompanied with her soldier.

“Nicholas, how comes it that ye are here?” asked Vasilis.

In proprietary wont, Nicholas struck a fist to his chest and bowed to Vasilis before he could truly perceive the lingering question directed at him. “My-er-m’lord,” stuttered Nicholas, “how is it the Governor of Lycia takes such consideration of his servant? My captain granted me leave and I only just arrived.”

“Oh, dear me,” Vasilis replied putting his hand to his chin to express a charitable grief. “There has been a lapse in communication of late. Alas, it is my burden to have to bring this news to your ears. Your leave has been repealed, as with the others of your legion.”

“Repealed? He only just arrived!” Nysa protested clutching Nicholas’s hand tightly like the string of a kite in blustery weather. It was her intention to convince Nicholas during his stay to abscond the service. Despite his sworn oath and promotion to quartermaster, she desperately needed him near, like fire needing fuel to survive.

“His company is beckoned up north. The frontier has been plagued with enemies to the Empire for far too long, and their threat surmounts in futile defiance, adverse to the glory of Rome,” Vasilis explained. Now, putting his hand on Nicholas’s shoulder, he feigned the father figure once more. “You are called to valor and victory. It is the demand upon all citizens to carry their burden for the good of society. If one should not do as they are called upon, the fragile framework of our culture would collapse. Your country counts on your devotion and fealty.”

"Such a grand government cannot even supply adequate post to those who risk their lives for it," Nysa groaningly mocked.

"I am sorry," Vasilis sighed again. "I fear the messenger to your legion may have fallen to an ill fate. There is a fell enemy that dwells up north, yet your Empire has summoned you. Your vessel departs tomorrow."

"This is not fair," Nysa pouted.

"Life seldom is," Nicholas replied trying to muster his optimism. "Fear not, my love. Soon, I will return and retire the soldier's life, and then we shall wed."

Nicholas lifted up Nysa's hand and kissed her knuckles. Frowning at the tender moment, Vasilis couldn't wait a beat without interrupting. "Aye, fear not," he blurted. "We shall watch over Nysa in your stead. She, I guarantee, will be in good hands." Nicholas nodded with a dark disappointment and looked intently into Nysa's eyes. Neither noticed that under Vasilis' beguiling smile lurked a shadow.

But Nicholas wasn't back in Myra anymore, as his last memory of Nysa faded from forethought. Nicholas sighed, donning his soldier's apparel, and attempted to assemble inner courage. Yet, it seemed that he could still smell the fragrance of Nysa's perfume.

Stepping outside, Nicholas stuck his sword into the frozen soil and knelt before the image of a cross formed by the blade and hilt. Yes, his faith was still very much a part of him. While he had rebelliously escaped the vocation his Uncle designed for him, he never intended to depart from the beliefs he had held since a small child. Now called upon to fight for his country, he needed God's support. In fact, it was the words of his Lord: "render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's," that planted the thought-seed of joining the Roman legions.

"Dear Lord," he prayed in a hushed melancholy tone, "would that I be in the company of my beloved, yet I have made my decision and find myself on the brink of battle. I humbly ask that I may find my way home again."

And just then, stifling his petitions to the Almighty, his ears tuned into an almost inaudible, yet distinctly astonishing melody, a song that seemed to float on the air like an autumn leaf drifting on a gentle breeze. He stood and began slowly moving toward the epicenter of the song, drawn as if by the lure of the sirens. As he came closer, it grew louder and clearer, though as much as he tried, he could not understand the words. Either it was in an unknown language or the distance and natural echo made it indiscernible. But it wasn't the lyrics that attracted him, it was the source.

The tales he had heard of those who lived in the north spoke of a backwards, uncivilized, hairy lot, who could never be capable of producing a melody so sweet to his ears. Soon, he was so enthralled by the music no other sound could be heard and it didn't matter anymore from whence the music came. All that mattered now was being in the present moment and enjoying the music. Nicholas could only describe it as a perfect harmony between male and female voices of people who had fully mastered their vocal cords as instruments.

During a lull in the song he noticed that beside him stood a reindeer. The two turned and looked at each other at the same time and together they shared, as comrades, a cosmic moment. The beast's shoulders were about six feet high and its antlers were easily four feet across. Peering into the creature's small black glassy eyes, Nicholas felt as if he were gazing into a crystal ball portending his innermost voice. Chills ran down his spine and his skin rumped with goose bumps during a moment that seemed to last a hundred years but may have

been only seconds. Their rapport suddenly broke as the shout of his commander tore through the serenity.

"Romans!" Flavius shouted. "Draw hither!"

3

*Said the King to his people everywhere,
"Listen to what I say."*

"What have ye learned?" asked a captain in his deep demanding voice. He typically used this rallying call to evoke the soldiers to shout in response: "No fear! No mercy! Victory for Rome!"

As the captain called his questions and the soldiers would bark back their inculcate response, Nicholas remained silent. "No fear," he thought would be wonderful, but "no mercy"? He looked at the other soldiers who seemed to be reacting involuntarily and saw Cordus, responding in sync with the others like a mindless drone. He couldn't find Lysander, he too was probably chanting along with the masculine choir until the captain nodded his approval at their ardor and Flavius leaned forward to gaze down piercingly at his army.

"Destiny has come nigh," Flavius declared to the ranks before him as he sat mounted on his steed. His senior officers flanked him on either side, also upon their horses gazing upon their commanders with a look of confidence they hoped would impart courage. "Today is solely a step toward tomorrow, a brighter future for the glory of Rome."

Nicholas, standing far in the rear, could hardly hear Flavius' words. He wondered if those behind him could even make out any of the distant rhetoric. It seemed to Nicholas that inspirational speeches were best suited for those up front and center, those following would have to stir themselves up when they charged the enemy. "Yesterday some of you were merely

shepherds, craftsmen, or men of the sea, yet Romans. And today, as you stand before me, you are soldiers in the finest army the world has ever known!"

The soldiers cheered a fierce approval that stirred up their adrenaline and bravery. But for Nicholas it had the opposite affect; instead of the warrior within coming forth, he retreated into his natural tendency to observe and evaluate, still as a statue, he watched the others. He lamented while they cheered. He seemed to be the only one burdened with despair at the thought of killing another person.

At that moment, a scout, sweating and out of breath, scrambled out from the bushes to shout, "My liege!" He then paused to catch his breath and swallowed heavily, looking almost about to vomit. He evidently had run a very long way in a short amount of time. "My liege, I bring news!"

"I will have it," Flavius replied, eager for the news and yet understanding of his scout's exhaustion.

"The enemy approaches! They spied our scouts and began a swift advance to catch us unaware. They approach just over yonder hills!"

"Aye, son, you have done well. Take your leave." The scout stiffly bowed and staggered back as Flavius gathered his composure, wheeled his mount about and addressed his men. "You have heard it. On this auspicious hour, as we assemble, the enemy draws nigh to us!" Raising his voice to point of nearly breaking, he cried out, "Men! Romans! We march! For glory! For honor! FOR ROME!"

The battalions wheeled about and marched in stride for the next half hour. Behind the small cavalry came the infantry, among whom Nicholas strode. As they pressed northwest, parallel to the Danube, they neared the summit of the Danube Valley. The legion hiked swiftly through the trees, climbed the hills, and finally stood atop a butte to peer down into the haze

of the golden forest. With a silent hand gesture, Flavius signaled a halt that his commanders emulated. His keen eyes pierced the distance, searching for any sign of the enemy.

Lysander gripped his spear tightly while standing in his close arrayed body of troops known as a phalanx, mentally visualizing his victory. He was ready. Nicholas on the contrary did all he could to keep his mind off the forthcoming melee. He had been through Roman legionnaire training—swam laps upon laps in pools and the sea to build his muscles, hiked long hours carrying sixty pounds of gear to build his endurance, and sparred endlessly with wooden weapons to build his intuition and dexterity. However, sparring with Lysander had given him the best understanding of actual combat. Physically and mentally, he should have been ready, but he wasn't. He just didn't have it in him to kill another human being. Nicholas simply did not have the warrior's spirit.

The earth began to tremble ever so slightly. All Nicholas felt were vibrations; all he heard was a hushed roar of thousands of men. On the peak of the adjacent hill, through the autumn leaves, rose the regiments of their enemies. Because they donned colors that blended with their surroundings, they seemed to appear magically all at once. Then, without notice, an arrow pierced the sky and landed just before the hooves of Flavius's horse, which hopped back and whinnied in alarm. The missile was apparently a challenge from the spirited Northerners.

Flavius turned and gave another brief encouraging speech to his troops, but Nicholas was too far away to hear a word of it. The only word he heard was the last word of the speech. That single utterance which seemed to linger in the air put a stone in his gut and a spur in his rear—"CHARGE!"—and the fight was on.

The Roman infantry and cavalry charged as their archers, located behind, rained an arrow bombardment upon the barbarians ahead. Nicholas found it exhilarating to run together with so many brave and valiant warriors and for the first time, he even felt a prick of courage like a hot shard of metal on his braccæ driving him ever forward.

The Roman Legions stormed down the hill and just as they moved up another incline toward the Barbarians, they collided on predominantly level ground. The forces clashed heavily with the Barbarian army. The northern warriors were dressed in fur and leather and most wielded massive battle-axes. Pieces of armor and limbs began to fly in the blur of carnage. On every side now, Nicholas's companions were either hacking or being hacked and his vision narrowed. He looked left and right at combat all around until his eyes met those of a savage warrior with the intent to kill who was running straight for him.

At last, his training kicked in and he began working his shield, not only as a defense, but also as a nuisance and aggravation to his opponent until the moment came when he could jab his spear into the flesh of the burly brute who eagerly tried to take Nicholas's life. When the opportunity came, a second enemy slashing at him distracted him from his target. The battle-axe plucked his spear from his grip; disarmed, Nicholas had to switch from confrontation to evasion. He dodged one blow and blocked another, but the brute force of the Barbarian's strike slammed his back into a tree.

Unable to defend himself, Nicholas seemingly watched in slow motion as the axe blade moved slowly but inevitably in the direction of his neck while his brain burned with calculating options that would protect him. Finally, he shut his eyes, which was about all he could do in such a dismally precarious situation. However, the strike never landed as he

expected. Upon hearing a thud, he opened his eyes and found his foe had been felled by a Roman arrow. Nicholas looked about and saw the ranks of archers unleashing a fury of red-feathered arrows into the flanks of enemy forces.

Rough terrain made the phalanx maneuver ineffective on this uneven battlefield. Tree branches were more troublesome to their spear tips than enemy arrows. After a swift charge into the enemy forces, the phalanx dispersed. Lysander, ever the gallant hero, vanquished his foes, sword to axe. Nicholas, however, found himself swinging his sword to avoid hitting the vital organs of his opponents. He figured if they bled to death, God was in charge and would sort it out. It seemed to him to be his best attempt to keep his conscience clear of homicide, and his unorthodox approach hitherto was working.

He sliced a mangled gash in the leg of a foe who then fell back limping like a maimed bear. In the mind of Nicholas, this was an exhilarating way to vanquishing an enemy. He felt very much the conquering weapon-wielder until he found himself blindsided. The unseen enemy knocked away his sword and Nicholas leaped after it, narrowly evading the enemy's axe strokes. Now on the ground, Nicholas grabbed his blade and rolled over just in time to see the Barbarian about to slam a fatal blow. Finding himself face to face with death again, he figured his luck was bound to be a dry well. At that critical moment, a sword pierced his foe's chest from behind, and as the man toppled, Lysander revealed himself to be the rescuer.

The two gasped for air, exhausted from the constant fighting, and then Nicholas, playing the brave combatant, said, "I almost had him, you know."

"Stand tall," Lysander grunted, sneering at Nicholas for his nonchalance. "This is the real thing, not a faux skirmish between friends." These were bloodthirsty rivals and Lysander could not always keep one eye out for his friend's welfare and

race across a hot battlefield to attend his needs. "What did I say about watching your feet, Nicholas? This... this cannot happen again. I can't always be there to..." he left the remainder unsaid.

Nicholas nodded grimly and stood up. He then looked about and saw far more red-capes standing than Barbarians and his spirits elevated. "It would seem we are winning," said Nicholas.

Before a moment could pass, Flavius rode up commanding a handful of officers. "Fly, officers. Take charge of the advancing force and see that they be not outflanked!" Flavius barked and the officials rode off speedily. To Nicholas he said, "Quartermaster, follow me hence," and trotting in another direction. Nicholas scurried behind struggling to keep pace. Flavius continued, "I beheld a small band retreat thither. You and I shall cut off their retreat."

It made little sense why the head of the entire legionnaire forces should take the least likely soldier alone to slay an enemy when he had far more pressing matters to supervise. But then again, Nicholas's heart pounded rapidly, his eyes blurred from sweat, and his thoughts were too cloudy for much of anything to make sense. All he presently comprehended was his commander beckoned him and his good friend followed just behind.

Rounding some boulders, they found Flavius dismounted and crouching down behind shrubs, his gaze fixed on something through the thistles. "Come! Come!" he beckoned impatiently in a shouted whisper, waving his hand in urgency. Nicholas and Lysander approached sneakily and squatted with their commander. "Behold two Barbarians yonder, looking to survey the Danube ravine. They either plan to retreat or flank our men. Either way, ye are to prevent them."

Nicholas: The Fantastic Origin of Santa Claus

Nicholas gazed out and spied a couple rough-looking Barbarians trudging along a steep cliff. They were tall and ferocious, beastly men that might have the proficiency to even best Lysander. Nicholas was reluctant to take them on.

"Sir, how shall we..."

"Not 'we,' soldier," Flavius cut him off. "My will is *you* slay them, Nicholas."

"At least Lysander is with me," he thought, until Flavius took notice of Lysander, seemingly for the first time.

"You, I did not beckon," Flavius told Lysander sternly. "To the ranks! Anon!"

Lysander paused and glanced toward Nicholas. "Sir, surely the two of us would fare better..." Lysander stressed, but Flavius silenced him.

"Special need I have of the Quartermaster. Make haste, victory is not ours yet!" Lysander saluted from an automatic deference to his commander, but he was troubled. Why would Nicholas be preferred over all the more apt fighters, let alone be sent in solitude to fell two dangerous looking adversaries? However, Lysander could only obey and so he departed.

Nicholas watched his friend leave with concern. *THWAK!* The sound of bowstrings caught his attention in an instant and he turned to find the two Barbarians shooting arrows upward, to a higher brink, at advancing Roman soldiers. "No time to waste," Flavius demanded. "Lo, they are shooting at our men. Make haste!"

"Sir, the two of us could fend them off."

"NOW, soldier!"

Like a dog's collar yanked tightly by his master, Nicholas turned and swiftly made way toward the archers. As Nicholas moved quickly and silently toward the two foes, he watched one shoot a passing Roman, who plummeted off the bluff down to the river far below and Nicholas shuddered as the

body bounced off jagged rocks. He momentarily watched the scene in aversion, but knew he must press forward as silently as possible. Attack by surprise was his best option.

However, to his dismay, his foot crashed against some gravel and he lost his footing near the edge and rocks slid noisily over the ledge. One of the Barbarian archers turned and, seeing Nicholas, gave him a fright. In a blink, he recovered, drew his bow, and shot an arrow, but Nicholas dove behind a boulder barely evading the missile. There he found a projectile weapon of his own, a fist-sized rock. Nicholas hurled the rock into the face of the Barbarian, jumped over the boulder, and stabbed him through the chest, his first actual kill. Guilt for what he considered murder tried to slip into his conscience like a solar eclipse, but he refused to let it. The other man engaged him in a sword fight, which maneuvered Nicholas back into a boulder. When the man lunged to finish him off, Nicholas jumped backward onto the boulder and struck the Barbarian with his feet. Thrusting his legs into the man with all the strength his thighs could rally, he cast the Barbarian over the mountainside. His second kill.

For that brief moment, he was a battle-hardened warrior, and then sighed with relief just to be alive. He reminded himself that the scriptures did teach that there was a time for peace and a time for war. Maybe he could lean on that crutch of reason to acknowledge his fealty toward the nation that would have him play the soldier. Nicholas stood gasping fresh air and, gazing over the ravine, sheathed his victorious sword.

But wait. What was this? He felt a sudden burning sensation through the bottom of his ribs. A lump in his throat formed as though he had swallowed a granite orb the size of his hand; then weakness surged through every cell of his body. "What was this feeling?" he wondered as fluids filled his throat and weakness brought the full weight of his head to fall

forward. His gaze fell upon the point of the blade protruding from his chest covered with fresh red blood – his blood.

The blade withdrew and his knees buckled. Somehow, he reasoned dreamily, he must have missed an enemy. One must have come up from behind without his notice. How Flavius could have seen this without rescuing him, he didn't comprehend. Or maybe, Flavius was engaged in battle trying to save him. Or worse yet, his commander had fallen and now the bloodthirsty savage was taking the life of Nicholas. His knees slammed heavily on the rock as his heart slammed heavily upon despair. He had failed his captain.

In the fall, he found the ability to turn about to see who had conquered his life through the cowardice of stabbing him from behind. And his eyes saw a tragic sight that would change him forever—a sight that shook him to the fabric of his being—like a dormant volcano exploding with such fury to change the landscape around it permanently. Shocked to the core, Nicholas discovered the man who had stabbed him was not a barbarian enemy, but his commander. It was Flavius. The one for whom Nicholas would fight and die had claimed his life for reasons he could not understand. All he could think was, “Why?”

“I am sorry, Nicholas,” Flavius began to explain. “You were to die in battle and not by my hand. Albeit, if the Governor of Lycia bids ye ensure the death of a soldier to garner his support, I must earn it.” Nicholas tried to speak, but there wasn't enough air in his lungs. “See you in the afterlife... maybe.”

The erupting volcano within began to spew forth ash and smoke. He tried to rise with explosive rage, but Flavius planted his foot square into his wounded chest and thrust a kick that vaulted Nicholas over the precipice. He fell through the air followed by a small trail of blood and tear drops.

❧ Chapter Two ❧

O Tannenbaum

*You're green not only in the summertime,
No, also in winter when it snows.*

"C'mon, Nicholas, let me see!" Nysa pleaded as she jumped onto a bed in a small room lit by the exterior sunset. It was summertime in Myra and the sun set later in the day. Citizens bustled in the streets, flowers bloomed to their fullest, birds came out of the shade as the air cooled to a gentle warmth and the nighttime Mediterranean breeze began to waft in from the sea. It was a perfect day, just a few short days until Nicholas was to ship out on his deployment. Nysa eagerly waited for him to step out from behind a linen curtain fully dressed in his Roman infantryman uniform for the first time. She clutched a large pillow to her bosom and dropped to her knees on a mattress waiting anxiously.

Nicholas threw aside the curtain and swept his red cloak behind him and then struck a Herculean pose of valor. It was his every intention to have her swoon a little, but it was her instant giggle that made him drop the victorious masquerade and be his humble self again. "Ye find this funny?" he asked.

"Admit, I must, I never saw you like this before now," she said, now looking entertained by the man before her. She rose from the bed and went straight to fiddling with the red cape and adjusting it a bit on him. "Though the red does suit you."

"That is for the best," Nicholas replied, thoroughly enjoying her attention and attraction. "Seeing how I shall don this often henceforth." He now looked soberly in her eyes. "I depart in two day's time."

"Nicholas," she sighed. "Why are you doing this? Has this been your lifelong dream? Could there be another profession of your choosing?"

He took her hand gently. He knew exactly where she was coming from, and he nearly agreed with her wholeheartedly, if it wasn't for some gut nagging feeling. "This is my new path, Nysa. I have chosen it and I will stick to it."

"But why, I ask? You were in training for priesthood."

"Marriage is not often found practiced among priests. There is a great motion toward disallowing it. Yes, I see their argument. Paul of Tarsus did urge men of the cloth like himself to forego such pleasures. And yet, he also talks about pastors being married and having a family."

"You see? Why cast aside your life's ambition?" she quarreled. She wanted very much for him to be happy. And a little selfishly, she wanted him home... not overseas. She wished he'd take on a profession, even a meager one, close by.

"Nysa," Nicholas began, taking a deep breath to seek the lexis of his heart. "For the past three centuries the Empire has slaughtered believers, and priests wear a far greater target on their heads. Would that I give you the whole world, at least a world of peace. As a soldier, united with the sovereignty, I can have a prosperous career. One that will earn the wealth for our marriage, the wealth my uncle stole from me a time ago."

She stepped back and walked toward the bed and straightened the sheets, finding some activity for her idle hands, to defend herself from what she was going to say. "That was a lifetime ago. I know in time you will see to it to forgive your uncle." She knew Nicholas as a lamb, but sensed that a

lion slept beneath his soft exterior. At times like this, she would guard herself from possibly waking it.

Nicholas was almost tempted to be upset with her, but he knew better. In fact, he could easily forgive his uncle for withholding his inheritance. He only kept his anger about it to disguise his true quarrel with his uncle, which was his disdain for his relationship with Nysa. He stepped forward and took her hand once again. "You're right, that was a lifetime ago. My life is now in your hands. It is yours, as is my heart."

They kissed. Their kiss was intended to be brief, but they seldom were. As soon as her soft lips pressed against his, and his hands felt her hips and slender frame, he easily succumbed to the whirlpool the world instantly became. His hands naturally found their way through the wide-open slits of her dress and began to caress the small of her back. Her smooth skin was the smoothest surface he had felt in the world and instantly the sense of touch was intoxicating to him. To Nysa, being touched was an exhilaration all the same.

"I know this be sin," she said softly into his cheek, "just can we for tonight only pretend we have made our wedding covenant?" At the same time, it was everything Nicholas hoped she would say, and everything he hoped she wouldn't. He was allured and grieved alike. But after years in the underground monastery, certain inhibitions were placed in his psyche, and he logically thought through their purpose. As much as he wanted her, fornication was not what he wanted. He would regret it, and he would sooner die than regret loving Nysa, in the passionately physical sense.

"Nysa, if only..." he began to say, still struggling deep within. "Yet I would not violate the law on my heart. It's because I love you that I want you so badly, and it's because I love you I will wait for you to be mine under the blessing of our Lord."

Nysa expected this response, and while in her moment of passion she figured it was worth a try. His soberness planted her feet back on the ground. She knew this man all too well and trusted him with her heart, and his strength to resist her made her love him all the more. With a warm smile she replied, "One can remove the boy from the church, except hardly remove the church from the boy."

"Yea, and further the boy can become his own man and see the world outside the church," he said, reemphasizing his goal. It was to keep his mind resolved to do what he meant to do and to convince himself that he wasn't only fleeing the responsibilities of his relationship. For as much as he enjoyed it, he was still the naïve boy afraid of change.

It reemphasized the dagger in Nysa's heart, how it grieved her to see him go. Without him, there wasn't much in Myra for her. She turned, fighting a sob and gripped her hair, trying to find something to cling on to steady herself, and keep diligent in being strong for him. And in her hair, her fingers found a little apple-red ribbon Nicholas had bought for her a year ago. This ribbon *was* him in her mind, and now she wanted it to be her in his; to remind Nicholas of Nysa always. Red, the color of her love that burns deep for him, a burning in her longing for them to remain together always. She untied it, clasped the hilt at Nicholas's hip, and strung it around the handle. "Then as you travel or battle, behold your hilt and remember that love waits for you hither," she said tenderly.

With the ribbon fixed upon the sword, Nicholas embraced her yet again and brought his chin to rest on her head. "And hither shall my heart be, forevermore."

Nevertheless, “hither” was no longer where Nicholas found himself. He was ice-cold floating down the Danube like beech wood in a crimson stream. The cold numbed the pain in his chest but nothing could numb the pain of his heart. It is hard to say what went through Nicholas’s mind as his limp body floated adrift. It held either a thousand thoughts at once, or blankness. Treachery of such a lethal kind did that to the mind. It was far more disorienting than to not know which was up and which was down. It was like being flung into a whole other universe where the night stars were black seeds and the darkness was a blanket of white; where snow burned and fire froze.

Though it felt to him that his spirit had already departed and his voyage down the river an eternity long, it was actually only about ten minutes until a strong hand snatched his red cloak. His weightlessness ended now that his body felt the full drag of the current pressing against him. Then the strong arm lifted him out of the water and the pain in his chest intensified. He strained to behold the event, but his eyes were far too glazed over and the water in his ears made the voices inaudible. He only knew he was being carried and then set down on soft grass and leaves.

His ears opened briefly and the blurry faces about him moved in haste, quickly trying either to rob him or heal him. Their language was indiscernible, though it resembled the angelic choir he heard earlier that day. They verbalized syllables and letters that meshed together like the sound of a flowing brook or the placid rustle of leaves. Trying to focus on their words brought developing clarity to Nicholas’s mind, finally unclouding it, putting the treachery in the past for now and placing his attention in the present. And presently, he was dying rapidly. “Help... help me!” he forced himself to say.

One blurry face now looked him square in the eye, or so it seemed, and spoke in a tender elderly male voice. "Aha. A Greek? You find yourself in good hands, lad, I assure you. Stay strong, I pray, stay strong." He then pulled away and spoke his eloquent gibberish in a more assertive tone and then another blurry face filled Nicholas's sight.

His mouth was fed what felt like minced leaves and tasted sweet and bitter, like oregano and marjoram fused together is the closest thing he could describe. "Consume these herbs, friend. It'll help," said a younger sounding voice.

"Only, be prepared, it will make you feel rather dizzy, lad," said the older voice.

Before he knew it, he was over the lap of one of the earthen-clad figures mounted upon a horse, and they galloped off swiftly. Again, his mind drifted toward the madness of where his life had just turned. Was this a punishment for taking another's life? If so, why weren't all warriors suffering as he? Would he make it? Would he live? If he lived, where will he be? What would he do? How could he return to Nysa? Nysa...

"Nysa..." he groaned.

A kind hand gently stroked his hair as they bumped along atop the galloping horse. The soft touch sent warmth through his ailing body, and just as he spoke, he became very faint, very uncomfortable, and so utterly exhausted, and then, blackness.

2

*Your dress wants to teach me something,
Your hope and durability provide comfort and strength.*

Nicholas slowly opened his eyes and looked around befuddled at the wood carved chairs and table, large open windows, branches and leaves weaving art and frameworks.

The walls, the ceiling, everything looked like branches had naturally grown to make a weatherproof structure. He enjoyed the novel sight for a moment until his memories came flooding back. His head was a bit groggy for it felt as though he slept a long duration in a dreamless sleep. Many dreams one can figure out are just the brain's way of processing the events of the day. Now, Nicholas figured his dreamless slumber was a sign his mind dared not endeavor the daunting task of sorting out what had happened to him the day he fell into the black cold sleep. He struggled to rise up and winced in pain as he felt as though the blade was still in his chest. The thick wool blanket dropped from his torso and he hugged his chest, now wrapped in blood soaked bandages.

"Those wounds will take time," said the elderly voice. Nicholas looked up, startled, and saw a thin, yet chiseled man with long silver hair pulled back into a braid, adorned with a golden leaf fairly placed above his ear. He wore green and brown tones, a green tunic under a leather vest. His face looked a bit frail, weary from hours of watching, sitting by a window, caring over Nicholas for unknown reasons. He looked to be in the middle of carving a little wooden wolf, with a small penknife in one hand and wood shavings piled on the table. "I assure you, they will heal, just our magic works by the inner power of your spirit. We have the herbs, you need the will."

"Forgive me, sir," Nicholas said, not paying much mind to the words spoken to him. "Do I know you?"

"In time to come, yes. You will know me well, and I you. Foresight is not my gift, though I have a slight knack at it." He looked out the window and spied a little sparrow building a nest. Lifting the wood shavings from the tabletop, he whistled at the bird a replica of the animal's natural call that could deceive even the most cunning ears.

"You... you're the man who saved me?" Nicholas asked, struggling through the stiffness in his chest to push air from his lungs to speak. Although, just being awake, he could notice the pain departing, only subtly.

"Mostly correct," the elderly person replied as the sparrow flew through the open window and perched on the table. While the elderly person lifted the wood up to the sparrow, Nicholas observed with astonishment that the old man's ears were leaf shaped! "Save, I am no man," said the stranger.

Nicholas stared in a perplexed gasp as the elderly fellow let the bird fly away with a beak full of wood shavings—new furnishings for its home. "Your ears... who are you?" Nicholas asked, afraid to sound rude, amazed at the display.

He then smiled and rose to his full height, just over six feet, and responded warmly, "I am Kenalfon, son of Walorfon," he said, casually walking forward, opening his arms in a manner to present himself, "archer and member of the high council of Alfheim, at your service."

Save for the hair on his head, he was cleanly shaven, a quality Nicholas took note of. Those whom his company has warred against were hairy, savage men. This person, Kenalfon, standing before him now, was nothing like a barbarian. "I have not heard of your realm, nor met someone with ears like yours."

"I should suspect not. Few men have," said Kenalfon with a smirk. Then shifting to a darker tone, he elaborated, "and even fewer have lived to tell of it." Nicholas's heart sank. Why would this stranger mend him to murder him? Nicholas froze in fright when suddenly Kenalfon laughed. "I am kidding you, sir! As surely as it is better for the sun to rise, 'tis better to laugh than cry." He continued to chuckle as Nicholas conceived what had just happened and then smiled along with him.

"Oh, I—"

"We are a surreptitious folk that enjoy the lighter side of this world. Dancing, merriment, and humor," he said, finishing his friendly chuckle. "Have ye not heard of angels?"

Nicholas was taken aback yet again, rising in his bed, trying to comprehend this fellow. Surely, this was another poor attempt at a joke. "Angels? You say you are an angel?"

Kenalfon didn't laugh this time. In fact, his tone became more stern and his demeanor more authoritative. "We are angelic," he said with an attitude to express that he was not mincing words; rather that he was absolutely serious in his elaboration. "A lower order of angels that dwell on Earth with the charge to muse, inspire and guide." Nicholas still waited for the joke to expose itself. He expected Kenalfon to divulge a punch line; something that he could make sense of. Nicholas had been through far too much recently to take his spiritual understanding of the world and knock that upside down as well. Angels were invisible spirits in a plane of existence man couldn't directly mingle with; an invisible realm. And to him, that was where they belonged—not revealing themselves to him in the guise of aged woodsmen.

Kenalfon continued explaining to the dumbfounded patient on the bed, "I have been on this earth for thousands of years. My father, Walorfon, came to the world along with Gilgamesh in the years shortly after the Great Deluge. We have gone on to do many great things, always on the side of humanity, even if that meant to pose as the enemy of man to stir up their hearts and draw forth your greatest champions. All cultures have experienced us in some way. The Greeks call us Nymphs. The Slavs call us the Vili. And the local Nordic folk call us Elves."

"Elves?" Nicholas sighed. Though he asked, it wasn't really a question. In fact, Kenalfon's tone left little room for

doubt. Truly, they had the talent to mend his lethal wound and ears unseen on any man he had ever met, but it was the captivating genuineness of Kenalfon's eyes and voice that gave his words their authenticity. Nicholas rubbed his chin, prickly from the shadow of a rising beard, in deliberation.

"I must ask that you don't stare at me too long and hard. I fear I must remind you of your manners, sir, to introduce yourself to me," Kenalfon said, with authority in his voice, tenderness in his tone, and a smiling twinkle in his eyes.

"Pray, forgive me," Nicholas said. "I am Nicholas, son of Epiphaneos."

Kenalfon reached out his firm hand toward Nicholas, "Come with me, Nicholas."

Expecting to instantly fall after having been whisked out of bed, Nicholas was amazed at the strength he had already gained in such a short amount of time. He was supplied with a crutch, however, seeing how there was still much healing needed, and was then led outside.

Once through the doorway, instantaneously, all five senses were struck overwhelmingly. His nostrils opened wide to carry in a sweet pine fragrance and the smell of unrecognizable cooking cuisines so aromatic as to awaken his appetite with immediacy. The scent was so strong he could taste it. His ears felt like they widened open as well to try to receive as much as possible of the soft song floating along the breeze, filling the atmosphere with such delight. Mingled with the melody were the sounds of laughter, giggles of children and the mirth of those older. After his eyes adjusted to the sunlight, he beheld a city in the trees.

Alfheim was an organic society, a network built into the forest. Not quite built, however, more like grown, as though the architects of this macrobiotic municipality were master gardeners. Branches grew like byways between the trees and

the structures developed in their boughs. There were rope bridges and other earthenware and Elf-made items about, though they were rare. Decoratively placed above all doorways perched a little green mossy shrub. Nicholas would at some point later inquire of their nature to which Kenalfon would say very little, only just that they were "mistletoe; a ward against an evil I shall not speak of."

The Elven community bustled about adorned in leaves and forest tones, looking like extensions of the trees themselves. Children were at play. Adults congregated together telling humorous tales, or were at some task that they did not look to be laboring over. It wasn't labor, it was life, and they sang their portion of the lively tune that filled the air like one united choir. In fact, this was Nicholas's first taste of the harmony of the universe. The ever-dancing spirals from the large Milky Way to the tiniest organism moved together in a functioning unanimity that made life thrive.

Nicholas gazed at the society with wonder as several citizens returned the fascination his direction through intrigued expressions and quirked eyebrows. "You, lad, are the first human being to step foot in our realm for a very long time," Kenalfon explained in response to the inquisitive eyes pointed toward his guest. Kenalfon had waited for the spell to sink its way into Nicholas's psyche before further elaborating on their civilization. "You will find, Nicholas, that we Elves are a simple folk that live in harmony with nature and prosper. A lifestyle I yearn that man would emulate. Indeed, if man would take our way of life, war would be a word of myth until long forgotten in the annals of history. This *is* community."

Nicholas watched with great interest in an Elf woman singing gaily with a choir of colorful birds perched upon a bough just over her head. This was a world of wonder and truly he wished it could be a lifestyle practiced around the

earth. "You say you watch over us, then why is it ye are so hidden from mankind?"

Kenalfon patted Nicholas's shoulder to guide him along the bough byway. "Your artists, prophets, and poets have sighted us oft," he said with some gravity in his tone of voice. "Yet, verily, it is man's lust for power and thirst for war that drives us away. Alas, too many of us, like a moth to the candle, were so entreated by savage man with the intent to rescue them only to be crushed by despair, killed, or worse..." his voice trailed as he seemed to discover his digressing thoughts.

"And all of you hide away here?" Nicholas persisted, truly intrigued by the concealed community.

Kenalfon, to keep control over the topic, lead Nicholas to a spot where the Elven City Hall was visible and their mayor discussed matters with other citizens. "This is Mid Alfheim, ruled by Alaric," Kenalfon said, motioning toward their mayor, a tall impressive Elf in bright green with a white sash. He had just finished an amusing anecdote and laughed with other Elves, and watched Nicholas out of the corner of his eye. Alaric looked at Nicholas unlike Kenalfon had, a quality of disdain was what he evoked. Nicholas suddenly felt like an intruder, even an invader there to undo the greatness of their country. Alaric looked away leaving Nicholas shaken.

"South is Lesser Alfheim and to the north lay Greater Alfheim, home of Völundar, Elven King," Kenalfon continued, not taking notice of Nicholas's pause. He pressed upon his shoulder again to lead. "Come along. Alaric only doesn't trust you so that everyone else doesn't have to worry about it. The society can live in peace, and he will bear the burden of suspicion until a time when he knows for certain you are worthy."

"Worthy of what, pray tell?"

"All in due time, lad," he replied with an assertive nod and went on to lead his guest further. "Come along."

They passed by more Elves speaking in their enigmatic tongue walking on a wide bough and around a bend, past spruce trees that made up their hall and then they entered the grand square, the center of Mid Alfheim. It was a marvelous courtyard clearing in their forest village and in the center stood the tallest pine tree imaginable. It stood about twelve stories high and it was adorned in twinkling colors and glistening decorations. Using pulley systems for hoisting, Elves were raised up and suspended into the limbs and needles of the great tree to dress garland strands, beads of many colors, knick-knacks of majestic design, and large glass balls. This novel spectacle took several moments for Nicholas to survey.

"What event do I gaze upon here?" he asked, marveling at the grandeur.

Kenalfon again led him by touch onto a small wood platform hovering by cables and released a timber lever activating a system of counter-weights that easily lowered their stage down toward the forest floor. "This is the Grand Tannenbaum," he said with an almost childlike delight. "It is a focal point for the Yule Festival which is only just over a month away."

"Yule festival?" Nicholas asked.

Their platform had just arrived on the ground when a lovely blonde Elven girl, who looked not a day over eighteen years old, although ages were far too difficult to calculate, worked one of the pulley contraptions and greeted them from a distance. "Kenalfon! This must be the stranger ye spoke of," she said absent-mindedly releasing her lever causing another Elf, hoisted up into the Tannenbaum, to drop.

"Hoy! Nisse!" he shouted, annoyed and alarmed.

Nisse caught the lever straightaway and the dangling Elf halted his fall. Nisse looked back up toward Kenalfon, and gave a shy smirk toward Nicholas and blushed. She then turned her attention toward the Elf hanging by the cables. "I beg your pardon, Tomte," she shouted up to him. "You're doing a mighty fine job!"

"Hail, Nisse," Kenalfon began. "You are all doing a mighty fine job. The Tannenbaum looks absolutely splendid. Oh, forgive me, this is Nicholas. The man we rescued, he's from Greece."

Nicholas clutched his chest, growing tired from the exertion, but feigned polite manners. "Lycia, actually. Greetings - er - Nisse."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," she said, dropping the lever and clasping Nicholas's forearm. The spool released and Tomte dropped again and on his cry, both Kenalfon and Nisse clutched the handle and stopped him. Needless to say, Tomte turned flushed. "Oh, convict this contraption!"

Tomte strained to adjust the harness, being in great discomfort from having his breeches hiked tight between his thighs. "Nisse, please!"

Nisse turned right away and started reeling him back upward. To remove the tension of her double-blunder, she asked without thinking, "I presume you are the one to fulfill the prophecy?"

"Excuse me?" asked Nicholas.

"Has Kenalfon not told you?" Nisse asked just when Kenalfon stepped in.

"To your work, Nisse," he reproached. And then he held Nicholas's arm to tug him along. "We leave you. Carry on."

"It was a pleasure, Nicholas!" Nisse called to them as they departed. She had never seen a human before. She had always heard stories of their ruthlessness, greed, and malice toward

each other. But she also heard of the heroes of men. Those who have come to pass and others expected still. And she held a high naïve hope that Nicholas was the one they were waiting for. She sighed and leaned down again on the apparatus popping the handle lose, and Tomte dropped thirty feet, fortunately, into a thick mound of leaves.

Tomte slapped the ground and kicked up the leaves in a heave of frustration. Nisse looked away to hide her laughing and went to wind the spool once more. She was a little embarrassed by her blunder, however, far more mentally occupied with thoughts and dreams of the stranger present in their quiet undisturbed land.

Kenalfon still showed Nicholas around their town, while Nicholas's mind lingered elsewhere. "There," Kenalfon said pointing to a hut built into the roots of a thick tree trunk where smoke billowed through a small gap in the bark, "you shall find the finest baked goods in all Alfheim."

"What meant Nisse by 'prophecy'?" Nicholas asked, not paying attention to his guided tour.

Kenalfon sighed, stopped, and faced him with a look of gravity. "The Yule is a great Holy Day for us," he explained, the gravity lessening and his childlike joy began to shine again. "With it we celebrate the birth; when the great Creator of all became incarnate as a man. That was when the universe was changed forever, when our Creator made a path for peace and love on this earth unlike ever before. 'Tis a festival we have mused the locals into keeping, sadly their measly reverence has turned to gluttonous revelry." The magnitude returned and Kenalfon looked up to the clouds. "Those whom we have given the Yule use it for drinking and carnal enjoyment, rather than for thanksgiving. I would that all mankind hold this celebration to remind themselves of a truth—that there is hope. And so, a prophecy, there is, that a man shall come and convey

the Yule, a message of love, generosity, and selflessness, to the children of men."

"Nisse thinks that I am he?" Nicholas asked at first with shock. Then he bemused the notion with insincerity and asked, "Why the staid feeling about that? How big or small a task is it to tell others about a holiday?" Nicholas asked with a smirk.

Kenalfon did not smile in return. He turned and straightened his back and began to recite the prophetic poem passed down for centuries:

*"Turtle doves flew on night of night,
Lo, there a star shone in the sky.
Herald of the coming king of might,
Who beckoned all of creation nigh.
The birth signals the storm to end.
The warmth brought demise upon the cold,
A spark of life into hearts to mend,
As captives dreamed of in times of old.
Peace of heart, only there to find,
On shaken hill, the king did die.
Tearful eyes watched with demons behind,
Secret unthinkable, truly 'twas a lie.
As dawn broke forth, Majesty then rose,
Surety of hidden root planted in quiet night.
Forgotten endless candle still glows,
'Till crimson-clad man lifts it to height.
Uniting spirit, man, and beast,
Champion of Yule shall ride forth.
Undoing evil wrought west to east,
To vanquish poverty south to north.
As long as Warrior Priest does ride,
The night of nights shall never in memory fade.
And children of men find hope to guide,
Upon a golden path angels laid."*

Nicholas listened noiselessly, he dared not disturb the religious ardor this Elven versifier had expressed in his recitation. "It was your cherry-hued cape," Kenalfon said, turning toward Nicholas with a grin. "The day after I had a dream of running deer toward a great statue of a warrior, and borne upon his head was a crown of holly and ivy. And when the holly turned crimson, our ballad came to mind when I awoke. I knew that soon I would find you."

At Kenalfon mentioning the red cape, Nicholas was finally reminded of the tragedy and betrayal that had taken place. Within him, the fiery lava spewed forth from the volcano of his heart once again. "That was the cape of a Roman Soldier," Nicholas snapped. He threw his crutch to the ground and relied on wrath to steady his bones. "I was a Roman soldier! That red ye speak of was part of the uniform of murderers and cowards. A visage I would gladly see rent and burned. After what was done unto me..." Nicholas felt faint and it took all his might to retrieve his crutch without collapsing. He rose up, turned around, and started to limp away. "I am not the one ye wait for," he said with his back turned to Kenalfon.

Kenalfon quickened his pace to follow behind, trying to console his new friend. "'Tis possible you are not the one," he started to explain, trying to meet Nicholas on a middle ground. "The prophecy said it would be a priest, not a soldier."

3

*O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum,
How loyal are your needles.*

Nicholas spent a few more weeks in bed, resting and eating marvelous Elven meals—food that reached down into his soul and gave it a warm massage. The flavors and aromas were nothing like he had eaten. The food never felt greasy, nor

dry, never bland, nor too sharp with flavor. Every mouthful was like consuming silk, if silk tasted as smooth and soft as it felt or as splendid as it looked. And yet with all this comfort, he was horribly troubled. He missed Nysa and wondered what word of his demise may have befallen her ears as of yet. He was sure report would go back that he had been killed in battle. There was no way Flavius would let it be public knowledge he took aside a soldier in order to slay him.

Nisse gave him constant attention, far more often than Kenalfon. It was through her that he learned much of their unique heritage and customs—learning that they were simple in their complexities and complex in their simplicities in every way. Nisse was a joy. He had discovered she was only about four hundred years old, which in Elvish reckoning was rather young. She could expound to him history in the eyes of her people with a childish awe about every tale she told. She said it was her uncle, her mother's brother, who posed as Goliath. He was willing to play the part of the violent killer, to do a necessary evil in order to draw forth David as champion, the would-be king of his people, from being the simple shepherd boy.

"Then, is Goliath, your uncle, still alive?" Nicholas asked.

"Not in this world, no," she replied with a hint of sorrow.

"I had assumed you were immortal."

"Oh yes, we are indeed. Though as we dwell on the same plane as mortal men, death's sting can still find us. And wickedness can still poison us," she explained, still downcast and seemingly digressing down a dark tunnel she dare not venture through by thought or speech. "But never shall we fear. The candle still burns bright, brighter still now ye are here, crimson-clad man."

Nicholas looked aside and gazed upon the gear he wore when he fell into the Danube. Elves found his sword and

brought it to him a few days prior. In its scabbard, it rest under the windowsill, the red ribbon dangling in a calm draft moving through a gap in the window. He did not know why Nisse persisted with the nonsense that he was a prophesied hero come to make progress for their holiday. Though anytime he dwelled on the subject, he recalled Kenalfon's words: "The prophecy said he would be a priest, not a soldier."

His mind drifted back to the last conversation he had with his uncle. "This is not your destiny," were the last words his uncle had spoken to him in the dark basement of their hidden monastery in Patara. Nicholas was eighteen years old, slimmer for lack of muscle definition, and his hair was shaven. It was tonsured only the day before and Nicholas shaved it all off. If he was to start afresh, his hair was to start anew as well. This was his last day hiding as a religious rebel standing against the rising tide of the empire. He resolved to keep his faith a social secret. He planned to dissent from the organization he was raised in to start a new life with Nysa. He would see the world and become a man—his own man.

There he stood in Greek civilian clothing with what little belongings he considered were his wrapped in a rag. A few candles lit the room and only one crucifix decorated the pale, cracked walls. The building was transformed into a church during the days of Paul of Tarsus, who made visits to Patara and immortalized the town in his epistle. Uncle Nicholas, Epiphaneos's brother, whom Nicholas was named after, stood dismayed in the doorway. "Nicholas, my son," he pleaded, "this is not as it should be. Why are you doing this?"

"There comes a time, Uncle," Nicholas explained with his back to his uncle, "when a man will cut his losses, and join

another side. You say I should live in poverty. You say I should remain loyal to our cause. You do not seem to see our people killed or taxed to death. I-" he stopped himself. He wanted to say all that he sought to, but he was trained not to be greedy. He was trained to be silent when no good words could be found.

"From whence did you learn such foolishness? You know very well there is so much more to this life. That we are ambassadors of peace and salvation living in a dark world. We are the light!"

"I have seen too much bloodshed, torture, rape, and murder, to our people, Uncle," Nicholas explained passionately. And that was a strong reason to hide his faith, to preserve his life. But he knew he owed his uncle enough to give him the full truth, even if he wouldn't stand to listen to his uncle's rebuttal. "I have fallen in love, and a priest cannot marry, you say. Nor does one earn an income to afford a wife living as a man of the cloth."

"Nicholas, Nysa is-" Uncle Nicholas began to explain, but Nicholas would not hear it.

"Nor does a priest earn any respect!" Nicholas continued fervently, finally turning and facing his uncle. His eyes were puffy and flushed, but he was determined to head down this path. "Seems only respect is found at the tip of a Roman blade. Now I will be the one to wield said blade and will ensure justice is done with it!"

"Justice? As a Roman?"

"I can find a position of authority. Maybe I could be as Joseph to Pharaoh!"

"If only that was the will of God, my son. This is not your destiny, Nicholas."

Nicholas was hopeless. He couldn't reason with his uncle and he certainly knew his uncle might reason with him if he

stayed longer. He could be talked out of this hard decision, and he would the next day talk himself back into leaving. If he was ever to leave, now was the time. He wouldn't end up a martyr like his parents. That was an odious destiny that he rebuked vehemently.

"You cannot tell me what my destiny is. Nobody can!" And Nicholas stormed through the doorway, not to see his uncle again.

Now he found himself in the city of earthbound angels who told him of his destiny, and his old negation of fate, no matter what form it presented itself, rose in him once again. As soon as he was healthy enough, he planned to take his leave from the land and find a way home. He contemplated his goals, ignoring Nisse, and rubbed his chin. His face was now shaven. The Elves naturally were barren of facial hair, and from days as a Roman soldier, he was wont to shaving. At least this way in the nation he dwelled in he looked less like an alien. Kenalfon entered the timber hut and gave Nicholas a serious look.

"Out of bed, Nicholas," he told him. "The time for bed-ridden healing has passed. Now is the time to enter a bright and splendid morn, to mend the Elven way, to set you on your path and breathe new vitality into your bones." The way he said it, like Roman commanders had, Nicholas instinctively complied.

This was Kenalfon: He was the aroma of fresh dried herbs, a seasoning to any bland life he came into contact with. In his wisdom, from vast experience and eons of age, he was a

mentor to a multitude of Elves and men; whether or not the men knew he was an Elf or not. Such as Plato, whom he arranged personally to learn under Socrates. His philosophical works had gained him great renown in Elven communities, and it was often questioned as to why he wasn't seated in the office of Alaric.

Truth be told, it was his humility. He had somehow, in spite of the thousands of years he'd walked this world, maintained an innocent, pure, and even childlike perspective on things. He dwelled in hope and still felt elated by the many wonders of Mother Earth. Almost every activity, from fishing to carving, from cooking to archery, enchanted him, and he became greatly proficient at most tasks. His passion was discussing philosophical topics with anyone who would dare chew the fat with him. It was daring to do so for he would keep them for days at a time if he could, just to talk deep and profound themes.

In this personality was his pining for the coming of the man who would bring the Yule to the world and preserve the Holy Day, the special celebration of life, and the magic of the event that took place three centuries before. And now he was every bit the definition of a sage to Nicholas for, without too much insistence and pressure, he believed Nicholas to be the one.

His first lesson for Nicholas was botany, to study the plants, herbs and such, and learn the art of healing. He taught Nicholas what the natural world had to offer—that grown out from the dirt, hanging in trees, clinging to moist rocks, was an abundance of nutrition fashioned to supply all living creatures in a perfect harmony. Just as the charming songs the Elves would sing, the universe operated in accordance, a cosmic dance to perfect time and rhythm. Kenalfon and Nicholas,

regularly with Nisse joining them, would go out and pick from the shrubs and brush to mill the plants in stone grinding bowls. They would brew some into teas, others they could keep as fine powders or pastes.

One day the three walked along a brook when they found a bird with a broken wing on the ground below its nest. Kenalfon seized the opportunity to demonstrate their healing power and fed the little bird some powder from a pouch. "When our heart wields these remedies any creature can be saved. The medicine carries the dormant potential for healing, yet it is the divine spark within you that can vitalize the curative magic."

Within the minute, the bird's wing was mended. Kenalfon kindly kissed the bird's head and lifted it up and it flew away. Nicholas marveled at the supernatural result before him. "How is it that I cannot mend so rapidly as that fowl?" Nicholas asked. "I have been consuming your remedies for nearly a fortnight and still I ache."

Kenalfon exhaled heavily. "The herbs can cure your wounds if it were not for the poison still in your heart."

Later that evening, after letting those words ruminate in his mind, Nicholas came to Kenalfon's porch over-looking the torch-lit woodland city. Kenalfon rocked in his chair while painting a little red and white striped cane. "Can I rid myself of the poison ye speak of?" Nicholas inquired with deep concern.

"You have yet to truly divulge the whole episode that brought you to float along the waterway on the rim of fatality," Kenalfon replied, eyes still locked on his project.

Nicholas sat on a guide-rail, heavy-hearted. "I can barely comprehend it myself. I was betrayed, Kenalfon. My commanding... I'd rather not utter another word about it." He rubbed his ailing chest in thought; rather trying to avoid thoughts.

"We all have our own paths, Nicholas. The fork in your road will be a choice based on forgiveness," Kenalfon told him.

"Forgiveness..." Nicholas hoped he was kidding. Forgiveness reminded him of redemption, and redemption of his religion, and religion of God. The God, whom he was told was all-loving and merciful, had just now allowed a murderer to go free and steal from him everything. This was after his mother, father, and brothers were all killed. Was he nothing but a pincushion to God who disregarded Nicholas as a breathing feeling being, but something to stab and punish needlessly?

He didn't want to brood over this. His faith was shaken and it felt it would be a long while before the vibrations ceased. He needed to put it aside, maybe to be picked up at a later time. Now, he needed strength, healing, and courage. He required growing and mending so that he may leave this land. Until then, he had a good friend in the aged sage now adding finishing touches to his little trinket. "I thank you, truly, for your aid. If ever you are down in Lycia—wait, do you ever leave Mid Alfheim?"

"On occasion."

"You must have spent time in Greece to have learned my language," Nicholas stated.

"I had been there, but I will tell you something about our tongue," Kenalfon replied and then leaned forward. "We use the tongue spoken by all ere the division of languages among men. Fable has it that if one should glean our speech they can truly deduce all tongues of men."

This was most intriguing to Nicholas. He had learned Latin and Greek, and a good amount of Hebrew, in his schooling, but the idea of learning all languages of men... this was a stimulating exploit. "Would you teach me?" he asked of Kenalfon.

“Aye, Nicholas,” he answered with a smile. “It is verily my intention to tutor you in all the ways of the Elves.”

The second lesson continued with the first, but now everything was taught in Elvish. Kenalfon started by pointing at nouns and giving their Elvish equivalent. He continued with verbs, adjectives, numbers, and so on. The language wasn't too difficult really, though here and there he came across sounds that he had naturally never had to make as part of speech. But Nicholas was persistent with this study. Somehow, he knew that being conversant in other tongues would be a tactic in his mentally forming plan.

On a day as Nicholas and Kenalfon strolled through the forest, while Kenalfon searched for new objects to teach Nicholas the Elvish word for, they heard a remote, terrible howl. From the dale on the north side of the mountain Mid Alfheim was built on they perceived the beast making the howl was not too far off. The dreadful bellow made Nicholas want to retreat back to the safety of the village, but Kenalfon courageously and curiously hurried through the woods. Nicholas had no choice but to follow toward the wild animal's howl. After rounding a bend, nearing a brook, they passed by a few trees and found down in a small ravine a gray and white wolf pinned under rocks. It continued to howl and the sound wasn't like a communicating howl used in wolf packs, it was a wolf equivalent of a scream in agony.

“Either by the work of darkened hearts, or by malignant luck, rueful events take place in this world,” Kenalfon said leading the quickened pace down to the animal. “It is up to those able to perform all they can to correct such wrongs.”

Judging by the amount of dust in the air, Nicholas guessed that the wolf probably lost its footing, slid down amid a rockslide, and was now crushed under the weight of the rocks.

Nicholas and Kenalfon, both using the extent of their strength, lifted the largest boulder off the animal and then scattered the smaller stones underneath aside and cleared the creature's poor smashed paw. Nicholas looked at the creature with pity, but hesitated nearing its fangs. He looked to Kenalfon to take care of the situation with himself standing at a safer distance. However, Kenalfon rested an assuring hand on Nicholas's shoulder, encouraging him to administer the healing himself.

Nicholas nodded in reply, knowing it's never much use in arguing with the wise sage. He timidly approached the wolf and pulled out his pouch and loosened the drawstrings. Nicholas examined the broken leg, but the wolf writhed and growled at him. Nicholas froze at the snarling fangs now inches from his face. "Fear has encompassed the living by fallen man. Forsooth she is just as afraid of you. Now, never ye stay your heart by this, for deep within all creatures is the desire for harmony," Kenalfon explained. Nicholas heard just enough of the words to understand the gist of it; all he really heard was an angry beast growling at him.

Nicholas nodded and pet the wolf gently. The wolf barked and fought him, but Nicholas gently hushed and calmed the beast. Little did he know he conjured that spark of life Kenalfon told him about as he stroked the soft coat of the white wolf. There was a twinkle in his eye as warm, fuzzy feelings rushed down his arms. He respected this beast as a fellow creature that shares the same world with him. He was overjoyed that she survived the accident, and now he wished her benevolent tidings from his heart of hearts.

In Elvish he spoke in a soothing voice, "Shh. All is well. Be still." The wolf whimpered. He then rubbed the herbal paste over the wolf's wound until the blood dissolved away and the fracture faded.

As quick as that, the wolf hopped up to its feet and moved to run away, but paused. She then turned and tenderly licked Nicholas's cheek—an act that nearly moved him to tears. And in a flash, the animal scurried off into the woods. Nicholas sat down onto a boulder and pondered the episode for a moment. It was such a tender moment of connection with a beast and, despite their differences, they respected each other. Kenalfon stepped over him, "Nicholas, behold your bandages."

He took a second to figure what he meant and then complied. After lifting the warm layers of fabric, he exposed his belly to the frigid air. Nicholas peeled back the top of the wrapping and saw that his scar was less than half the size it was the last time he looked at it, and there was certainly no more fluid pouring from it.

Nicholas looked up to Kenalfon amazed, too moved to speak. Kenalfon nodded with a grin and as he moved to hike away he said, "Know now that your true healing has begun."

The third lesson Kenalfon had in store for his pupil was archery. Not only was it one of his favorite activities, it was actually a vital element of their culture. Nicholas had taken some tutorial in archery in the Roman training camp, and while he had some skill at it, it wasn't necessarily his proficiency. In fact, none of his supervisors found him very proficient at any form of combat, only good at taking stock and keeping others adequately supplied.

A group of Elves took Nicholas out to a field for a lesson in archery one autumn morning where they met Kenalfon, Nisse, Tomte, and Hugin, a mature looking Elf with raven-black hair, and a handful of others. A little distance from them stood a row of trees wearing targets. After the other Elves launched a volley of arrows into the targets, not one missing the center-mark more than an inch, Hugin turned to address Nicholas.

"Verily, this is simple! Let the bow be an extension of one arm and your arrow an extension of the other."

"Now that you are on the mend," Tomte chimed in. He looked about as youthful as Nisse and was nearly as enthusiastic. "There's never a better time to learn archery, eh?" Tomte, with simple ease, shot an arrow past the trees into another target several yards beyond the front line of targets. Nicholas sighed, not sure about the fool he was going to look like in front of all these talented Elves. However, this training was going to be another tool in his sack for his own devices and that encouraged him to carry on with it.

"Truth be told," Nicholas said awkwardly raising his bow and arrow, "I was a swordsman and not much of one at that."

"Give it a try, Nicholas!" Nisse popped in with her perpetual zeal.

Nicholas released the cord and the arrow wavered about in the air, at times heading for the tree, but inevitably missing the target, and the tree entirely. "You see," Nicholas grumbled.

"As was expected," Kenalfon assured him. He then stepped closer to whisper a deep and profound secret to him. "Focus, Nicholas, on exactly what it is you aim for. Let nothing else distract you. Focus, and do not over-concentrate. Relax and see the arrow strike the eye ere even releasing the cord."

He had heard instruction similar to this from Lysander, though not as eloquently stated. He'd often say things in the nature of "see the blade block the enemy's before you even swing" and other such obscure statements. But now having lived among the Elves for a spell, he was getting the knack of feeling the rhythm of the world around him, channeling that flow of energy and concentrating it into a goal-oriented needlepoint.

The goal: vengeance against his betrayer.

The goal: justice for the evils done unto him.

The goal: returning to Nysa and living happily.

He released the cord. The arrow streaked through the air heading right for the bull's-eye. Well, it didn't strike the center, or the target for that matter, but it stuck into the tree just outside of the target. Compared to his last shot, this was a tremendous improvement.

"Instant progress!" Hugin said with subdued encouragement.

"It shall take practice," Kenalfon reassured him. "All goals worth achieving do. You're not going to compare with those who have been arching arrows for centuries within the hour."

The Elves chuckled. Nicholas smirked. "So, I gain a hunting skill from this, aye? It has been too long since sinking my teeth in some meat for a change," Nicholas remarked.

The amusement departed from every face around him—even Nisse's. Nicholas looked at them in a perplexed squint, not sure how his comment could remotely offend them. "What say you?"

"You see," Tomte proceeded to clarify awkwardly, "it is not our way. We do not eat meat."

"Say again?" Nicholas responded. In an already novel society he was growing accustomed to differences and changes, but a wholly vegetarian lifestyle was still shocking.

"Forsooth," explained Kenalfon, "ere the fall of man did all creatures only partake of fruits, vegetables, or the grain. We continue in such a tradition."

"How could you deny the right to partake of meat? Even beasts consume other beasts!" Nicholas disputed.

"We are not saying that man's choice to eat meat is wrong. Let us say that we feel it is *more* right to not ingest what once belonged to another living creature," Kenalfon said with a smirk. "Fear no judgment, Nicholas. Only know that as long as ye remain among us, that will not be a dish served."

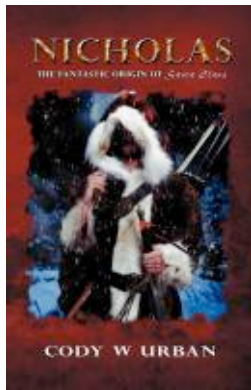
Nicholas: The Fantastic Origin of Santa Claus

Nicholas could even feel his stomach rumble. "Alas, for my cravings!" he sighed looking downward. There he noticed the bow in his hand. "What do we use the arrows for then?"

Hugin drew his bowstring and launched an arrow up, through an apple and the arrow carried the apple from the tree and struck a trunk at a lower, within reach, area. With a grin, looking at his feat, he said, "They have their uses."

Nicholas couldn't slow the rolling of his eyes. "What an absurd use for archery," he noted. "You undoubtedly jest! You mean to tell me that you train in this skill for picking fruit?"

Kenalfon sighed and placed his hand on Nicholas's shoulder, "Peace, son," he said with a sigh. "For you are in a land of the light. There is a darkness, of which ye know not, that would seek to destroy all that is pure." With that, he said no more on the subject, no matter how often Nicholas would interview him, Kenalfon would restrain. He bent down, raised another arrow to Nicholas, and said, "Again."



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Nicholas

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