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Families across Norway celebrated a meager and melancholy holiday that year. Sonja's and Nils' families were even more limited than most, since every morsel of special food was in reserve for the coming wedding. Nevertheless the early dusk of Christmas Eve found Nils and his family dressed in their holiday best, though bunader remained in the closets.

They were seated around a table that bore at least some resemblance to celebrations of the past. Evergreen boughs and candles topped the heirloom tablecloth, silver paper stars hung in the windows, and a small tree stood in the corner, covered with carved and painted ornaments, embroidered snowflakes, and chains of dried berries.

Nils and Knut sat at the ends of the table, with Anika happily tucked on a bench under her mother's arm. Kristia sat across from them, beaming at the rare blessing of having them all together. Since their parents died several years ago, they were closer than most siblings, trusting each other for support in good times and in bad.

They all tried to display good cheer for the sake of little Anika. Meager quantities of specialty dishes like rommegrot, lefse, sausage, kringle, rosettes, and cream sauce provided small tastes of tradition. Boiled potatoes, cabbages, and lutefisk, along with fresh fish, supplemented the spread, thanks to the brothers' efforts in the garden and fjord.

"How long will you be able to stay, Mama?" Anika asked again, for at least the tenth time that day.

“I’ll be leaving tomorrow evening on Knut’s last run to Bergen, sweet pea,” Lise said, kissing the top of her head. “I know, I know,” she said, imitating Anika’s pout. “Just be happy that your mama is a housekeeper, not a cook. Even the most demanding of my households does not want to have their own celebrations disturbed by a housekeeper. But the cooks! The poor cooks have been working around the clock, and will be cooking and serving from morning to night on Christmas Day. Heaven forbid if a dish is not ‘just so’, it will be tossed in the waste bin!”

“How awful!” cried Kristia. “That’s shameful!”

“They would never dump Anika’s cooking,” Knut said warmly, passing a bowl to Lise. “She and Kristia spent months climbing the hillsides to gather currants. They made this fine currant jam for our table.”

“Anika, you made this?” her mother beamed, spooning a dab onto her plate.

“Oh, ja, Mama. Tante Kristia taught me. You can take more, we have plenty.”

Kristia giggled, “That’s a fact, Lise. We have filled our cellar shelves with it now, so that we can at least serve jam and bread to the wedding guests if all else fails!”

Nils stood, kissed Anika, then Kristia on their cheeks, and smiled. “King Haakon himself couldn’t offer a finer food to his guests. Sonja and I will be honored to serve it.” Reaching for his glass, he paused thoughtfully to look at the faces gathered around the table before he continued. “Thank you all, for your hard work, and for your love and support. You are the finest family anyone could ever have. Mama and Papa would both be proud of all of you. God Jul!” As he raised his glass, the others did the same.

“And God Jul to King Haakon, wherever he is now. May God keep him safe and strong,” Knut added.

“And to my dear Sverre,” Lise spoke softly, leaning over to hug Anika.

“And to Bjørn and Rolf, and all the others who are not able to be with family tonight,” Kristia said.

“God Jul,” they chorused, but with more than a hint of melancholy in their voices.

Later that evening, they would join Sonja’s family for the candlelight parade through town and up the mountainside to church for midnight services. After dinner, though, they gathered around the tree, singing holiday songs. No one they knew had felt free to decorate their trees in the traditional way, with dozens of flags of Norway.

But deep within the branches of their tree Anika had placed a small star with a flag painted on it.

When they returned from church that night they were all more than ready for bed. “Wait,” Knut whispered. He lifted Anika’s flag star to the topmost branch. They stood together silently for a moment, hands on hearts. Then Anika’s small voice began and they all joined in singing “Ja, Vi Elsker”, their country’s anthem. This was their first Christmas of German occupation, a Christmas like no other. This was a Christmas for aching hearts and guarded hopes.