
No-Name in the Long Winter

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THE LONGER the winter lasted, the less welcome No-Name found herself. At first people muttered under their breath as she hurried past, ?It's her fault,? or ?Bad luck begets bad luck.? No-Name would hunch her shoulders further under the thick hood of her coat, and try to look as though she hadn't overheard.

Gradually the mutters turned to curses. As the complaints grew louder, an unsettling feeling lodged in No-Name's chest, as though a storm were building inside her. From the time that she was old enough to talk, No-Name had known that she didn't deserve a name. Her birth had torn her mother's body, and when her mother died her father killed himself. All because No-Name had been too greedy, hurrying to

be born. Every night before she slept, No-Name prayed for forgiveness.

But how could No-Name have caused as big a thing as winter? That made no sense. When the other children stopped playing with her, refusing even the offer of piggyback rides, the strange feeling in No-Name's chest grew fiercer. Instead of hunching her shoulders and watching the others play out of the corner of her eye, No-Name lifted up her head and walked away. She walked straight and tall, never flinching when the boys pelted her back with snowballs.

And as she walked straighter, No-Name spotted a second world she'd never paid attention to before. Squirrels raced above her along a network of frost-coated branches. Rustlings in the hedgerow announced mice or chipmunks. Tiny birds chirped arrogantly, their feathers fluffed out to extraordinary proportions.

No-Name had never wondered how the wild animals survived the winter. Now she watched the squirrels fight over an acorn, the birds scrabbling for one wrinkled berry. Even the trees looked sad, their bare twigs encased in a sheen of ice. At night, No-Name added a prayer that the wild animals would find enough food.

The days lengthened, but the frost continued unbroken. The morning after the equinox, No-Name went to Quick Fingers' house. She lifted the old woman out of bed, heating water so that Quick Fingers could wash without catching cold. Usually Quick Fingers kept up a constant stream of chatter, but that morning the old woman sat in silence while No-Name helped her into her clothes.

'Are you ill, Elder?' No-Name asked as she put some oatmeal on to cook. She'd been coming to help Quick Fingers every day for the last three years. The old woman had a sharp tongue toward the other adults, but she never turned that sharpness against No-Name.

'No, child.' Quick Fingers picked at a loose thread in her shawl. 'The last of the scouts returned yesterday evening. There's no sign of spring anywhere.' As Quick Fingers pulled at the loose thread, a hole unraveled in her shawl, larger and larger. 'I think you should leave the village.'

For a moment, No-Name thought she must have misheard, but Quick Fingers continued, 'People are frightened and looking for someone to blame. The other elders are halfway to believing you're a witch. You won't be safe here much longer.'

No-Name's hand shook as she stirred the oatmeal. She stirred more vigorously, hoping Quick Fingers wouldn't notice. No-Name's thoughts fluttered this way and that like a bird that wouldn't settle. How could she leave? Where would she go? Witches were evil, but they were also clever. No-Name wasn't clever, so she couldn't be a witch, could she? Could you be a witch without knowing it?

Quick Fingers took a folded sheet of paper out of her pocket. 'You remember visiting my sister in Amberstock last summer?'

No-Name nodded, not trusting her voice. They had been to Quick Fingers' sister once a month until Quick Fingers slipped in the autumn and hurt her leg.

'I've written a letter to my sister. If you take it to her, I think she'll let you stay with her awhile. Come here, child.'

When No-Name came over, Quick Fingers pressed the piece of paper into No-Name's hand.

‘It wasn’t your fault,’ said Quick Fingers. The old woman reached forward and hugged No-Name tightly as if she didn’t want to let go. ‘It wasn’t your fault your mother died, child.’

And that was the strangest thing that happened that day. No-Name kept turning the words over and over in her mind, but they didn’t fit. No-Name knew she was too greedy and impatient. Before the village started rationing food, she had the fattest cheeks. She loved eating anything sweet. People said that even before No-Name learned to walk, she kept asking when the next meal would be. How could it not be No-Name’s fault if she had ripped at her mother in her hurry to find food?

At the end of the day, after the last of her chores, No-Name crept through the shadowy dark into her stall at the end of the barn. She didn’t need any light to find the pile of her treasures, wedged behind a jutting plank. Surrounded by the warm animal smell, the soft chomping of the donkey, the familiar bulk of the cows off to one side, No-Name went through her collection.

A broken shoe-lace from one of her father’s boots. A handkerchief Quick Fingers had given her. Last and best of all, her mother’s sewing kit: a small needle, a large needle, and eight spools of thread. No-Name had never used the sewing kit, wanting to preserve her only keepsake of her mother. One by one, No-Name added her treasures to the bundle of things to take away with her.

Then she wrapped one arm around the bundle, wriggled herself into a comfortable position in the hay, and fell asleep before she finished saying her prayers.

* * * *

Quick Fingers had told No-Name to set off as early as possible, without telling anyone else. So when No-Name woke just before sunrise the next morning, she delayed only to refill the water trough for the animals.

No-Name tramped along the low ridge at the start of the footpath to Amberstock. Once she looked back at the village. In the moonlight, the houses seemed like small black creatures squatting on the ground. A solitary lantern flickered faintly from a window.

Slowly the sky lightened. Birds called out warnings as No-Name approached. Bits of sunlight caught on snow and frost, burning with rainbow colors. No-Name’s breath puffed out white in front of her.

The footpath dipped down into a forest. Carefully No-Name watched for the markings, the V-shaped notches carved into the tree trunks just above the height of her head. Without their leaves, the trees looked lonely and cold. No-Name whistled to let the trees know they had company, but they still looked sad.

Towards noon, snow clouds rolled in from the east. As the first flakes floated down, No-Name hurried along as fast as she could. Maybe she could reach the next village before the worst of the storm. She went so quickly, she forgot to watch for the notches marking the way. When she paused to catch her breath, she could barely see three paces in front of her.

She ran from one tree to another, searching for marks, but didn’t find any. The snow dragged at her boots and weighed heavy on her clothes. She tried to make out her footprints, so that she could turn back, but she had crossed this way and that in her confusion, and she didn’t know which tracks to follow.

A branch snagged her boot, and No-Name fell face down in the snow. In front of her loomed a huge tree with a crack down its side. Something moved within the crack.

No-Name inched forward. A squirrel and two chipmunks chattered at her from a large hollow in the tree. 'I'm sorry,' said No-Name as she squeezed herself into the hollow. 'Please excuse me.'

The chipmunks and the squirrel backed away, but stayed inside the shelter of the hollow. No-Name squirmed until no branches dug into her back. Undoing her bundle, she took out the loaf of bread and took a big bite. The animals started nervously at every movement No-Name made as she chewed. Both chipmunks looked bedraggled, and the squirrel's tail drooped as if he was too worn out to hold it upright. No-Name lifted the loaf for another bite, stopped, and instead tore the loaf into quarters. Solemnly she pushed one piece toward each of the animals, keeping the last quarter for herself.

The animals hesitated for a moment, before plunging teeth-first into the feast.

Outside the snow flakes fell so close together that No-Name couldn't see the nearest other tree.

'Thank you for offering me shelter,' said No-Name, patting the tree trunk. Quick Fingers had always taught No-Name to be polite. No-Name wasn't quite sure if trees ever deliberately helped people, but the tree had caught her foot so that she saw the hollow. That was the closest to a present she'd ever been given by anyone other than Quick Fingers.

No-Name wanted to give the tree a present in return, but in her greed she had already eaten her quarter of the bread. The chipmunks and the squirrel were still busy nibbling, but she didn't want to take away their food.

A pile of yellow leaves lined the bottom of the hollow. No-Name picked one up. Papery to the touch, the leaf had thin deep-red veins that stood out against the yellow. The tree must have looked beautiful with such fine leaves.

On impulse, No-Name took out the yellow spool of thread from her mother's sewing kit, broke off a short piece of thread, and tied the leaf to a branch jutting out to her left.

The leaf turned slowly, as if stretching to show off its colors.

No-Name clapped her hands in delight. 'Thank you again.'

She closed her eyes and quickly drifted toward sleep, but something rustled at her feet. She opened one eye reluctantly. The pair of chipmunks ran out of the pile of leaves as she stirred.

Of course, thought No-Name, still half asleep. If the tree liked having one leaf back, how much it would like having more. She took out the yellow thread again, and picked up another leaf. Carefully she attached the leaf to the branch. One by one, she bound the leaves to the tree. Each time the yellow spool of thread looked a little emptier, and a quiet sadness seeped into No-Name. But the tree had sheltered her, and she did not begrudge it the gift. Besides, she still had the seven other spools of thread untouched.

When she fell asleep the second time, the yellow thread had run out. But every twig, every jutting knob in the hollow was covered in yellow leaves, dancing and stretching in the cold air.

* * * *

The air in No-Name's dreams smelled odd, a sweetness there that No-Name had almost forgotten. She

wrinkled her nose, trying to work out what it could be, rising toward wakefulness. She opened one eye.

A curtain of tightly wrapped green buds waved above her, surmounted by pale cream blossoms.

No-Name rubbed her eyes hard, but the vision remained. She poked her head out of the hollow. Thin grass blades poked through a layer of snow. Above her the tree swayed gently, its branches a crush of cream blossom.

A squirrel stared down at her for a second, then disappeared in a scurry of feet and tail.

No-Name clambered out of the tree, clutching her bundle of belongings. A few paces ahead the rest of the forest lay blanketed in snow. Branches sagged downward, buried in a thick coat of snow.

Confused, No-Name took a few steps forward. The further she went from the tree with the hollow, the colder the air grew.

A miniature snow-shower cascaded around her. Glancing up, she spotted a sparrow perched on a branch, something red clutched in its beak. The redness fell down toward her: an oval leaf. It settled silently onto the snow.

No-Name stared at the leaf for a long time. Her hand crept to her bundle, then away again. All her mother's yellow thread had already gone. She didn't want to lose the red thread too.

She glanced up. The sparrow perched above her. She saw it shivering despite its puffed-out feathers. If the winter continued, even the forest couldn't shelter all the birds and animals.

No-Name took out the spool of red thread, stooped down and lifted the leaf.

* * * *

In the years afterward, the forest where No-Name sheltered during the blizzard was renamed the Thousand Color Wood. Even in winter, snow never fell there, and a tapestry of orange, gold, and red leaves carpeted the forest floor. The year of the Long Winter, and every year thereafter, spring came to the Thousand Color Wood before the surrounding countryside, and spread out from there like ripples from a pebble tossed into a pond.

As for No-Name, she grew up a tall, graceful woman, just a little plumper than average. Over the years she traveled widely and had many splendid adventures. Once a thief stole the pouch No-Name wore about her neck as she slept, thinking that such a famous adventurer must surely keep treasure there. But all the thief found inside was a broken shoelace, a handkerchief, and a sewing kit with eight empty spools. He threw down the pouch in disgust, and No-Name found it safely the next morning.

The End

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