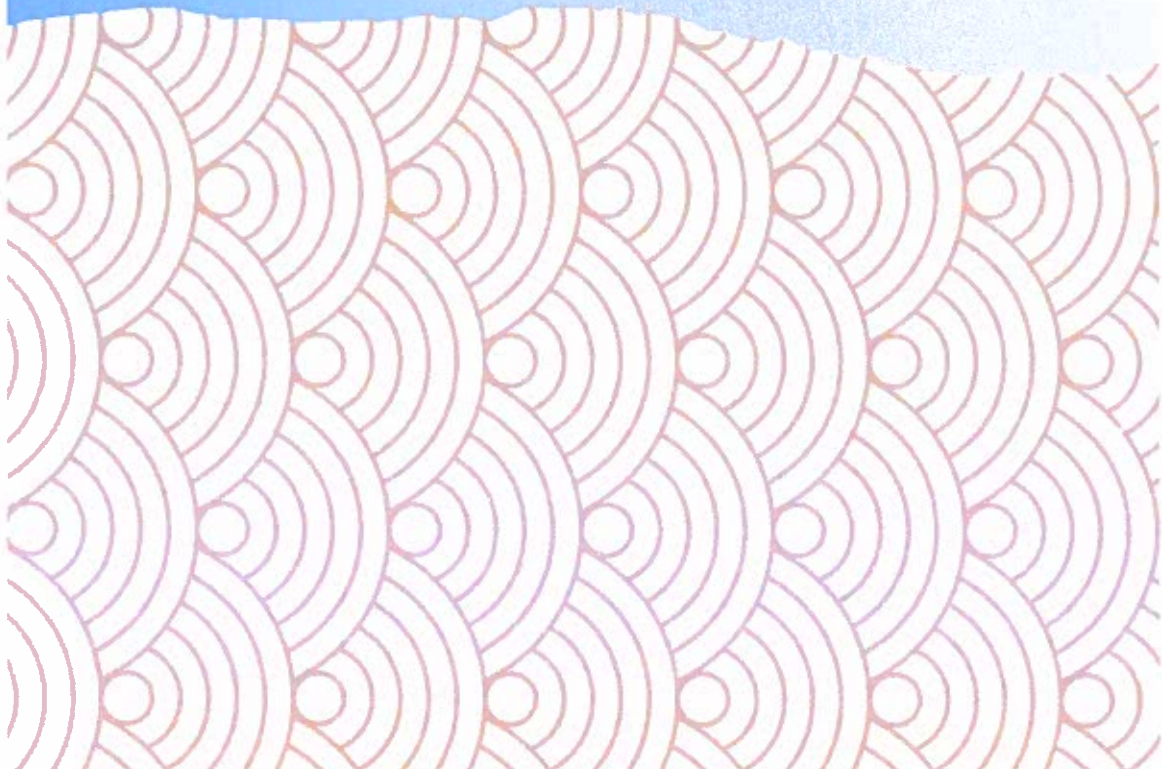




*Fire*



## Fire

Sven held his grandfather's hand. The hand he had watched gesture telling stories of Norse Heroics. Exploits to a new continent to the West. Adventures sailing inland seas and portaging across the western stretches of Asia separating them. All in courageous search for new challenges for the Norse spirit to conquer.

The hand was still. And cold. It had told its last tale. It fell in midsentence, while recounting a stout-hearted crew's efforts to weather a fierce storm. The howling torrent of wind-spiked hail that he and his grandson were braving on their own mountain climb had been suddenly charged alight with two fearsome bolts of horizon-splitting lightning. Deafened by the nearly simultaneous thunder, the boy never heard the mammoth tree burst asunder and crash down upon them. In one split second, the rampaging beast of winter took away Sven's breath, the ground beneath his feet, and the most intimate love of his life's eleven years.

Sven sat. Cold. Shivering. Alone. Halfway up the precipitous path to the sentinel spot. It was a ledge. On the face of the cliff. Three hundred and twenty meters above the foaming, crashing, darkened waters below. He stared out to sea from the fjord's lower half. The epic images of bravery and duty hung, suspended on the sheets of rain sweeping the channel. His grandfather had regaled these pictures of greatness into his mind. Now the voice that had whispered and growled, hushed and moaned in the avid telling of those feats was seized away. Amidst the freezing whiskers which would no longer nuzzle the boy to sleep, only to awaken him with a snore; the boy could feel no breath, hear no sound.

And the warmth was gone already from the old man's throbbless wrists. An ice encased tree limb kept the boy from resting his head one last time on his grandfather's chest, even if it were only to listen for an echo of that great Norse spirit from within.

Sven could hardly bear leaving him. But his choices were clear. Made clear, ironically, over the years by the very storyteller he now would have to leave behind. For Sven to sit much longer would be to invite the gods of the wind and sky to freeze him dead on the spot. To turn back and go for help, just in case there was the faintest spark of life left to restore, would mean the possible doom and death of fifteen other men. His father and brother among them. To forge ahead to the sentinel post would tempt the trolls and monsters of the woods, now that the torch to light his way lay extinguished beneath the frozen, bolt-blasted giant of the forest.

Letting his eyes adjust, Sven looked to the sea and then to the land. Gradually, looming shapes in the dark took definition. Sheets of lightning illuminated the sky just long enough to betray the next portion of the path. He stood. Kissed his grandfather softly on the lips. Turned. Headed up the path. The salt and warmth of his tears on his face runneled the frozen patches of his exposed cheeks.

Some distance up along the way Sven stopped. He eyed the wooden plank bridge across the mountain stream. Swollen and overflowing its banks, the swirling runoff from the day's storm carried chunks of small ice floes. Most broke as they dashed against the footings of the bridge. However, some appeared to be pushed back upstream. Unbelievably. Against the full force of the current. Fear rose so sharply in the boy's gut that his neck flushed warm, and the pits of his arms exploded in sweat, despite the freezing hail striking his forehead.

From Sven's earliest memories, it was from under such bridges that storytellers told of trolls darting their twisted arms and grasping hands. Here where young children who wandered from home were swept to stare in horrid fright into the blood-stained eyes of bulbous-faced terrors. Distorted beings with knobby joints and fur-loined waists, who expelled such foul breath it rendered their swooning victims unconscious. Sven had been here at this bridge only with his grandfather before. He looked at his shaking hands and didn't know if the cold or his terror made them tremble. The low moaning sounds of the wind rushing through between the water and the bridge was of no help to calm his soul. He didn't know how sure he was that it was only the wind he heard.

Staring at the bridge, which sat at the bend in the stream, the farthest horizon of his line of sight was again the sea. The bridge fell out of focus as he looked beyond. He squinted. He shook his head. Then Sven rubbed the base of his covered palms against his eyes. The frozen mittens stunned his face to life. His vision was shocked clear, he saw what he thought was a small light. Sven forced himself to ply the same skills his brother and father were probably using on board. He searched the sky for a star. The storm hid them all. He switched to the land. He fixed his sight on a tree down the path ahead of him, on the other side of the bridge. Next, he picked a distant, lone-standing tree outlined on the fjord across the way. He lined these up with the light on the horizon, forming a triangular frame with his mittened hands. He stood stock still for a long time. Within the frame of his hands, the light proceeded to move. Toward him. Slowly. But surely. Tossed around by the rough and towering sea. He looked again for a star. There simply were none to be seen.

His grandfather's voice in memory repeated the navigating lessons that generations of Norse explorers and adventurers had used and refined, taught and learned, and used and refined again and again. Without stars, it was absolutely essential for those on board to see a land-based fire signal. Behind him down the path lay his frozen grandfather. Before him rocked and beleaguered were, perhaps, his father and brother out in the open, life-freezing sea. Between them and life stood a troll-infested bridge. And a young, lonely, frightened eleven-year-old boy's terror.

Sven breathed in deeply. Twice. He fought his fear. He turned, halfway, away from the bridge, feigning a retreat. A huge expanse of sky flashed alight and lit the bridge. Sven exhaled and started running, pivoting at the same time, heading right for the bridge. His footsteps were all he could hear. Twig-breaking, ground-thumping footsteps. Twice. Then the sound of wood. He kept his eyes fixed on the horizon light, letting those in the boat serve as his saving guide through the dark and past his fear. Wood again. Three times. Four. A fifth. Almost at the end, it struck him, right above the ankle.

The contact sent him teetering. Side-swiped, his one leg crossed over in front of the other. His somersaulting was headlong. Splinters buried themselves in his hood. His feet were above him, hanging in the air, vaulting him forward, off the bridge. He slid through the mud and wet just passed the end of the bridge and his side hit a big rock. Instinctively, he rose to run again. He never looked anywhere but straight ahead, but slipped, nevertheless. Lying askew across the path, his eyes were fixed back at the bridge. Another bolt of fierce brilliance pierced the sky. In his several blinking images, the low-lying branch of a bush, washed up against the bridge by the rushing waters of the stream, hovered above the wooden planks not far from the bank. Had it been a bush that tripped him? Or had his courage moved the guardians of the brave Norse adventurers so much that they transformed his attacker?

Sven understood he would never know for sure. But he did know something. Something exposed by the lightning. He knew the twinkling shards his body broke off the big rock were precious. He collected a mittenful, dropped them deep inside his dry pocket, got up, and started running up the path. He could see no better than before. The light had not improved. Nevertheless, Sven knew now what he was meant to do. There would be no stopping him now. He ran and ran. The path grew to a familiar steepness. He pushed himself so hard that his feet almost forgot what his mind knew. One moment all he could see was the angry sky, the path was so upwardly pitched. The next, he fought to stop running; almost hurtling himself right off the sentinel ledge and out into the air overlooking the precipitous fjord.

It was there. Stacked in preparation, covered with the waterproofing seal skins. The signal pyre, awaiting the thrust of the torch used to light the way. Lit, it would proclaim home, safety, and victory to the tempest-tossed at sea.

But here he stood. The torch was dead. Cold. Somewhere next to the stiffened remains of his father's father. Here he stood. The youngest male of his line. And unless he did well, he might be the only male left in his line. He found the small spot of orange on the open sea. It was no longer on the horizon. It backlit the vague outline shape of the square sail, depending on the twisting of the gale. But it was also heading away. Downshore. Without the signal they would miss the fjord. Without the protection of the fjord, they might perish in the increasing maelstrom of surf surging back out from the coast in treacherous riptides and whirlpools.

Sven fell to his knees. The mittens were in the way of feeling the ground beneath the pyre. Where was the tinder? There was none. It was a fire prepared for torches only. He swore that he'd never make that mistake if he lived through this fearsome night. Daring the fates and risking his life, he pulled off the stiff mittens, using his teeth; letting both fall off at the sleeves, where they were attached with a leather thong.

He searched, fingers first, on the sides and beneath each tree trunk and rock for dry moss to kindle. What he found was sparse. And wet. Another sheet of lightning set the sky aglow. Undistracted, he used its light to scan the rock face of the ledge.

Two spots. He'd seen two distinctly. One a crevice only. But the other was a long crease. Numb to the knuckles, he forced his probing fingers into the crevice. He was thrilled to find it peeled away. He could sense its soft texture. He did not know where it ended until he tore a fingernail off against the rock when it did. Sven scooped the treasured, dry moss out of the crevice and stuck it down into the dry inside of his dangling mitten. The blood on his fingertip did not surprise him. He had felt the throbbing pain of the missing fingernail.

He turned to face the long crease. Hoping its harvest would be rich. He spared himself a moment to look to the sea and to tuck his one hand into the empty mitten to loosen his tightening fingers with some warmth. The boat was heading away. Soon it might be around the end of the fjord and then beyond the view of the pyre.

His fingers were momentarily warmed enough to touch the spongy-feeling growth lining the full length of the leeward-facing opening. The moss was still amazingly dry. It filled the rest of the first mitten and the second as well. With two handfuls left for his deep pocket.

Sven knelt. He carefully piled the dry moss inside the base of the pyre. He rearranged the smaller wood in a pyramid over it. He looked behind him to see the boat. It was almost out of sight.

He reached deep within his pocket, with hands too numb to feel the rocks. But he scooped them out anyway. Kneeling against the stacked wood, leaning his shoulder in to protect the moss from the wind, he struck two of the special stones together. They flew in two directions, his hands too cold to grip them tightly enough. He looked. They were beyond his reach. He put his hands cupped to his mouth and blew on his fingers. They tingled with pain. One was surely frostbitten. He plunged it into his mitten. It was not warm.

He glimpsed again over his shoulder again and could not see the light at sea. Sven did the unthinkable. He yanked at the fasteners on his outer coat. Exposed to the cold, his chest heaved. His arms crossed across his chest; he jammed his hands up into his armpits. They were the last warm place on his body he could reach. His fingers stung with the restored warmth. He waited as long as he dared.

Falling against the pyre, he reached for two more stones. They struck a spark. It fell on to the bare earth, missing the moss. It was getting moist. The next spark hit it at the edge, and it hissed the spark out. Again and again, a third and fourth time, he firmly struck the flint; expertly and without panic.

He smelled it first. Before the smoke started to rise from the moss, he smelled it smoldering. Then there was the tiniest, most precious flame he had ever seen. He leaned in, ever so gently blowing the flame. It spread quickly along the moss pile. Flames started to lick up the sides of his little pyramid. A crackle as one stick snapped and caught. There must have been some pitch on the next piece, left over from some ship-crafting. The flame

raced up its side and wrapped itself around two timbers of greater girth. It would all be timing now. And some luck.

Sven had watched only once when a lighter storm than this had extinguished a signal fire. The fire had to be going well in the windward side of the pyre before, just at the right moment, the seal skin cover was whipped off the unlit leeward side of the stacked wood. Done right, the quick draft of air swept the fire up the center flume of the stacked wood, to bring a seaworthy light to life. Done wrong, the new wind could snuff out the kindling, expose the pyre to the storm's fury, and render it too wet to burn.

Sven faced the sea. The light was almost gone down the coast. He grasped the sealskin tightly, with fingers now frozen into near uselessness. He thought of his grandfather. Of his father. Of his brother. Afraid to lose his grip, he twisted his arms within the skin, so it wrapped around his forearms up to each elbow. He took a deep breath and yanked as hard as he could. He toppled backwards and crashed against the rock face, right below the crease.

The flame shot sideways in the draft, sucked to the center of the pyre. The sound was that of a huge dragon, inhaling and then expelling a fiery breath. It shot to the sky. Flame engulfed the pyre. Sven's face and hands felt the heat.

He stood up, dazed. Amazed. He stepped off to the side and walked to a spot between the roaring blaze and the dark night of the sea. He looked to the sky. No stars. He looked at an outcropping of the distant fjord. His eyes traced an imaginary line, downcoast. The light on the water was beyond the line.

He waited. He stood very still. Eyes fixed on the line only he and the gods above knew was there. The light curved. Then the light on the water disappeared. He held his ground. If they went around beyond his signal, he would stand still until dawn. A patch of lighter hue appeared after a time too long to measure in breaths, because none were taken on the sentinel post. The square turned. From behind it glowed the deck lantern. Sven gasped.

He had never seen a sunrise as glorious as that little light cast across the dark waters from on the board the circling boat. He held the line. Before too long, the craft and its lantern re-crossed the line, moving back upcoast, making way for the fjord.

Sven sat by the huge, storm-defying signal fire. He warmed his hands and chest. He dried the inside of his mittens. That done, he put his coat back on, bundling against the cold rain. He found the dry wood in the cave around the path from the signal shelf and kept the fire burning brightly. He lashed the seal skin to the metal hooks anchored for that purpose in the rock face below the crease. The heat of the fire would start to dry it out and tomorrow's sun would finish the task. It would be folded and put in the cave and made ready to use on the next fire. That would be for others to build and prepare. Sven would tell his story and the elders would think of what else to leave in the cave for fire starting when torches had gone out as his had done.

For now, he would keep the fire burning, using the cave to stay as dry as he could. When they were safely in the fjord, and the storm allowed, Sven would return down the steep path, walk across the bridge, and sit with his grandfather until daylight, when he was sure the others would come looking for them.