

Chapter 1: The Yellow Narcissus, Spring, AD 3

The yellow narcissus wore a crown of jewels bestowed by the warm spring rain. It was the month of Ostera. The youth, glistening with the grace of baptism conferred by Donar's cloudy passage, watched the sunlight's iridescent rays refracting through the water droplets captured on the flower's golden trumpet and crown of pale yellow petals. Lying on the soft spring grass, the boy had that rare view accessible only to those willing to come close to the earth, as he watched the scintillating shades of red, green, and blue from the sun's effusion pierce the patchy, watery cloak left by the shower on the flower's leaves seemingly outstretched as if in prayer. He had seen this posture before among the men in his tribe, as they prayed to the sky. No doubt, the narcissus was sending forth a prayer of gratitude to the clouds and the sun for this gift. Yes! It must be praying, for the gentle odor of the flower is its vocabulary of prayer. The flower's delicate perfume was quiet, but all the better since the gods know what is in the hearts of men and have no need of boisterous or clamorous prayer, so he had been told by Uncle Segimundaz.

The boy had heard men shouting at the sky as if an assault of many words and loud voices were the secret to gaining the attention of heaven's ear. He had heard nature's song of praise many times, most often from the trees, and its sweetness filled him with a sense of well being, for he knew that beloved Ostera now ruled the earth and sent her sweet breath through the trees. He had been told that the Romans would burn reeds that sent a sweet-smelling smoke to carry their prayers up to their gods. If the flowers and trees sent their prayers to heaven, he knew that the gods reciprocated, and Ostera would then shower them with gifts of life. The newly budding leaves in the trees above him joined in the prayer and sent their jeweled droplets, caught in columns of sunlight, falling into the long, soft grass upon which he lay. The untrained Roman ear according to Segimundaz would hear only a random rustling from the leaves, but those who love the forest know the language of the trees and would be

able to detect the subtle pervasive harmony that guides each leaf. Thus, the prayers of the pines can be distinguished from those of the oaks and beeches. Indeed, even throughout the tumultuous storm he could discern the red ash welcoming the passage of Donar.

As he lay on the grass, he could follow Donar's path by the flashing strikes in the distant valley and hear the trailing thunderous claps from his vantage point on the hilltop. Sunlight provided columns of light as if to support the ethereal lightness of heaven's clouds. The gentle caress of Oстера's touch sent a warm chill through him for he was totally uncovered. During the storm, he had thrown his cloak aside and leaped about with that joy that only the young experience in the exuberance of their physical well being. It was that time of life when the simple fact of existing filled the boy with a sense that bordered on an agony of ecstasy. On the verge of puberty, the boy felt the wind stroking his back and legs, declaring its promise of secret joys, not clearly defined, but surely to come.

The forest, stunned during the storm's riot, returned from its awed silence. Sounds intruded on the boy's consciousness, as he listened to the buzzing of insects, the croaking of frogs in hidden ponds, and the special chattering of the forest birds. As charming as the birds' songs were, they did not compare with Mother's singing. Her voice was as pure and clean as the pristine water splashing and lapping over the rocks in the brooks. He turned over onto his back and saw an incredibly blue sky. A heaven washed clean of all dust and obscurity by the storm emerged through the gaps in the bright green leafy canopy above him. A train of shining white clouds followed the storm's passage revealing more and more of the achingly beautiful sky, a blue that reminded him of Mother's eyes.

Lying on the cool grass and half dreaming, he mused that the blue eyes of heaven, like a smiling benevolent goddess, were sending their blessings on the forest, which seemed entirely plausible to him. Why, if heaven were so lovely, did the gods find earthly women more desirable than their own divine

consorts? Everyone in his village knew of Hercules, the man-god, fathered by a god but born of a woman. He had been told that the Romans even believed that the heroic Hercules had done deeds so great that he was rewarded with a special palace in the sky. Although no one he knew had actually seen Hercules, the boy surmised that the man must have been spectacular in strength and appearance.

He did not have a clear image of himself, however, since the watery surface of the pools were rarely without disturbance. On rare occasions, he had seen a distorted image of himself in polished bronze. But he knew the image was not faithful, since he could compare Mother's image in the bronze to her actual appearance. But he knew this much: his brown hair and dark eyes set him somewhat apart from his companions of the same age. Moreover, he did not show great promise of becoming very tall. His brother, Ariogaz, who was his senior by not even two winters, was already a head taller. Nevertheless, Uncle Segimundaz reassured him that he resembled some of his grandfathers who had been great chiefs and heroes and highly respected by their tribesmen. Segimundaz, who seemed to know everything of importance in the world, related to the boy and the village how the family had an ancestor, several generations past, who had come with the army led by a great Roman general west of the Rhine. As a reward for his service to the general, his ancestor was given land, and he had remained to marry into the family. This story was eminently reasonable to the village for the Romans rarely brought women with them, and those Romans who wanted wives could likely find them only among the Germani. No doubt, so says Segimundaz, Erland has inherited his features from his great grandfather.

Despite the boy's small stature, he was lean and muscular and a match in strength and agility to his pale-haired and blue-eyed taller compatriots. All noted his endurance, as he could outlast the other boys of his age in long running. He was quick to understand the reasoning of the older men, seeming to have insights that were beyond those of his boyhood companions. His uncle, who himself was recognized in the village as a man of wise counsel, devoted an unusually large amount of time to the

boy, seeing in him qualities long before anyone else in the village recognized them.

Segimundaz, the brother of Erland's mother, in fact, was more of a father to the boy than the lad's own father. Erland did not take after his father, Hrador, either in temperament or physical attributes. Hrador was a robust fighter but rash and prone to action before reflection. Segimundaz anticipated that the day would come when the community valued his unusual nephew's counsel. Already the other boys looked to Erland as somewhat of a leader and organizer and were ready to follow him, even given the expectations of his community that private advantage is the principal incentive to action rather than community benefit.

This day Erland had gone with the scouts anticipating the return of the men and older boys from a boar hunt. Their task was to alert the village, so it could prepare for the hunters' return. Not knowing which path the hunting party would follow, Erland divided the boys into groups and sent them to various parts of the forest.

The sun was already in the last quarter of its daily journey. The boys needed to return to the village before twilight since there was danger from wolves and even more danger from unearthly evil that could emerge from the darkening forest. Erland draped his cloak about his shoulders, strode down the hill on the soft carpet of pine needles, and wove through the forest pines into the valley meadow where the boys had agreed to meet at this stage of the sun's position. The crickets, after starting out tentatively when the sun's first rays broke through the clouds and warmed the dampened grasses, resumed their full-throated singing. Small green and gray lizards, looking to warm themselves, darted about among the rocks looking for an advantageous spot. All of this activity imprinted itself upon Erland's conscience. The long shadows from the surrounding pines could not yet cover the entire valley floor within the large meadow.

The boys, emerging from various quadrants of the forest, raced across the meadow toward the village like young winds dancing across the tall grasses. They tickled the wild flowers and the budding bushes, as they leaped and chased each other. Heaven herself laughed with the joy of a mother upon seeing her sons so full of life and pleasure bounding among the newborn flowers.

Approaching the Cherusci village, they could see that it was unexpectedly agitated. The hunters had returned and done so by an originally unplanned route. The sounds of women wailing were discernible even from a hundred meters outside the village. ...