



**M**

y dear Mellema children,

My apologies for the abrupt ending to my last letter. Avvu had bumped the whirl-a-mailer, an ingenious gnomish contraption that sorts incoming letters and shoots them toward the desk of the proper correspondence elf. By the time I reached the mail room, it was spinning across the floor, launching envelopes past the heads of diving elves.

To Avvu's credit, he helped fix his own mess. He charged the whirl-a-mailer, taking two envelopes to the face, before pinning it down long enough for the repair gnome to shut it down. Sigh. Confound that polar bear.

But enough of my work problems. Back to the story:

The boys tiptoed to the glowing red snow, afraid to breathe. Jer bent and picked up the jewel like it was a baby bird.

They gasped. It was a ruby the size of an Easter egg, cut so intricate that each reflected star danced along its surface. It sat in a gold pendant etched with Nordic bears and holly. The chain it hung from, also golden, rang like chimes in the breeze. But the most wonderful thing was the light. It pulsed from the jewel's core in a swirl of scarlet.

The boys stared, mouths open.

"What is it?"

Jer turned from Matt's question. "I'm trying to look!" Jer said, pushing Bri aside and stepping further away.

Matt shoved Jer in the back, Jer punched Matt on the arm, Bri jumped on Jer's shoulders, and the three boys scuffled in the snow. Amid the shouts and the elbows and the icy faceplants, the ruby fell out of Jer's fist. Matt grabbed it.

"I had it first!" Jer shouted, clawing at Matt's hand.

"But I saw it first!" Bri said, pulling Jer away by his feet.

"Stop!" Matt yelled, stumbling up, "This is stupid."

The boys, doubled over and panting, shook their heads like coming out of a dream.

"I don't want Matt holding it all night." Jer reached for the jewel, and Matt got a sudden urge to run off into the field behind their yard.

"Let's take it inside to a neutral spot." Bri said. "Then tomorrow we'll write Santa to tell him we found his jewel."

"Uh, sure." Matt said, exchanging looks with Jer. "Or whoever."

An hour later, Jer lay sprawled on his bed, biting his lip and stewing. Why couldn't he keep the jewel in his room? He grabbed it first. It was no fair that Matt and Bri could take it from him and then make the rules. He turned to his side, but the ruby glow pulsed along the edge of his vision. Jaw set, he whipped off the covers from his bed.

He eased his way down the stairs, careful to avoid that creaking step. The living room below was deeply quiet. The last embers glowed in the fireplace, and the family cat, Katie, lay curled in the bottom branches of the tree. Reaching the bottom, he peered at the neutral location above the fireplace mantle. His heart jumped out of his chest--the jewel was gone.

Jer whirled around the living room, looking under tables, between cushions, and even inside stockings. Where was it? He charged from room to room, anger rising with each step.

He halted. Beneath the laundry room door was a faint red light. Jer flung the door open to find Matt, hunched over the ruby like a dog with its bone.

Matt's eyes were wild. "I wasn't taking it," he said, "I just wanted to--"

Jer jumped him, and the boys wrestled across the laundry room floor, knees knocking against the linoleum as the ruby slid toward the washing machine.

"Hey!" Bri burst into the room.

"Matt tried stealing the jewel!" Jer pointed at Matt's chest.

"I wasn't going to keep it!" Matt replied, pushing Jer's finger away. "Besides, why were you looking for it?"

Before Jer could answer, Bri picked up the ruby. "You should both be ashamed of yourselves," he said. "We agreed to leave it on the fireplace. Besides, this doesn't belong to any of us. It belongs to . . ." Bri stared at the jewel, his eyes refracting its red glow. Then, without a word, he dashed out the back door.

Matt and Jer bolted after him, legs churning through the winter. They reached him at the same time, tackling him forward and sending the ruby flying through the air.

The boys scrambled for it, pulling themselves through the slush and pulling each other away.

Then they froze.

A rumble. A deep, bellowing rumble like the growl of a bear. Or the tumble of boulders. It echoed through their chests, icing them in place. Their heads craned to the field. Set against the trees and the setting moon was a silhouette, burly and humanoid.

It was the size of a house.

And that is all for now. Avvu just told me the last mail sled is about to take off, and I do not want the courier reindeer to be grumpy at me again.

I remain sincerely yours,

*Erno*