

## THE ENCHANTED HARE

A Norse Legend Retold

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Long ago, in the land of Vikings, a mighty ash tree held the world together. The roots of the tree dug deep beneath the mountains into the shadowy caves of the dwarfs and giants. The stout trunk supported Midgard, or Middle Earth, where human folk lived. High among the topmost branches, way above the clouds, was Asgard, the home of the gods. When the gods and goddesses wished to visit the mortals below, they journeyed down a rainbow that stretched from sky to earth.

The goddess Eostre was especially welcome in the cold northern land of the Vikings, for she brought the springtime. It was Eostre's hand that swept the snow from the meadows and her warm breath that melted the ice on the rivers. When she traveled down the rainbow bridge, winter went away.

One year, Eostre was late in coming to Midgard. The North Wind wailed through the bare branches of the trees, storm clouds hid the rainbow, and the hand of the frost giant still grasped the earth.

On one dreary day, when the sun glowed no brighter than a candle flame, a young girl trudged through the woods. Though she wore heavy boots, her toes were numb. Her bearskin cloak was stiff with ice, and the wind whistled through its folds and creases. Her name was Nanna, and she lived with her mother and father in a hut at the forest's edge. Their winter woodpile had long since been burned, and she had promised to fill a basket with twigs and sticks to kindle the fire. So Nanna searched the snow, now and then breaking off a small branch to put in her basket, pulling a dried weed stalk, or blowing on her raw fingers. Suddenly she spied a pine cone, but as she bent to pick it up, it chirped and blinked a round black eye. The cone was a small bird.

"Poor thing!" said Nanna. "Don't you know you have come home too early? It is still winter."

Again the bird chirruped and struggled to stand on its thin legs.

“You’re a long way from home,” whispered Nanna. You must fly back.” But when she dusted a sprinkling of snowflakes from the bird’s back, she saw that its wings were frozen. It would never fly again. Angrily, she called out to the North Wind, “Stop your icy blasts! See what you have done.”

But the North Wind roared even louder and seemed to shout:

*Foolish girl! Foolish pleas!*

*It is my task to blow and freeze.*

An icy gust swept about them, and the bird stumbled even more pitifully. Nanna cupped her hands around it and tried to warm its stiff feathers with her fingers. Then she called out again, “Please, gods of the trees, shelter this poor creature in your branches!”

But the trees creaked and shook their limbs from side to side, and rustling voices seemed to whisper:

*Ssssh! Ssssh! Such thing’s unheard.*

*No comfort here for beast or bird.*

Teardrops froze on Nanna’s cheeks. Surely the small bird would die before springtime came. Nanna looked into the gray sky. “Eostre,” she said, “come and help us, I pray you.”

Then the clouds scuttled away from the face of the sun, and a warm ray of golden sunlight spilled from the sky, melting the snow on the ground in front of Nanna. A wondrous woman stood there. Her eyes were as blue as the sea in summer, and her hair looked as if it had been braided from sunbeams. Though she was dressed in the lightest of robes, she did not seem to feel the cold. She put her hand on Nanna’s shoulder, and the frost melted beneath her touch. “Who calls Eostre?” she asked.

Nanna shivered, but not from chill. “Don’t be angry,” begged Nanna. She dropped her head, for the brightness of the goddess hurt her eyes. “I did not call for myself.”

“What do you have in your hand, child?”

“A small bird, nearly frozen. It will die soon unless you help it.”

Eostre sighed. “Why did it not wait for me? It flew out before I brought the spring. No creature in Midgard may do that and expect to live.”

“But it is such a tiny bird...”

“Large or little, it matters not. Those who disobey the rules of Asgard must be punished.”

“Kind goddess,” murmured Nanna, “it can no longer fly. Is that not punishment enough?”

“And what use is a bird that cannot fly?”

“It can hop,” answered Nanna quickly, “and I will care for it.”

Eostre was silent for a few moments. “You have already cared for the bird, child. You have given it love. I can do no less. The bird will live.”

Nanna began to thank the goddess, but Eostre waved away her words.

“A bird that cannot fly will not survive as a bird. If it can hop, let it be a hare.”

Nanna was so astonished that she dared to look directly at the goddess. “A hare?”

“Let me change its feathers to fur, its wings to long ears, its two legs to four legs,” said the goddess. “And as it now wears a cover of snow, let its pelt be white.”

“Will it be *my* hare?” asked Nanna.

Eostre shook her head. “It will belong to everyone. As the bird flew out before the spring, so will the hare come to these woods each year just before my return. It will bring my promise that spring shall soon arrive.”

Then the sun disappeared behind the clouds, and Eostre was gone. Nanna’s hands were empty. There was nothing to be seen save a small snow hare, hopping through the trees. But where the bird has nestled in her palm, a single feather remained.

Nanna hurried home, not caring that the sticks spilled from her basket. She was bursting with the news of the things she has seen and heard.

Nobody believed her.

“Enchanted hare, indeed!” scolded her mother. “Is this all the kindling you could find? It’s hardly enough to boil the broth.”

“Truly, Mother, it was Eostre,” Nanna protested.

“Shame, Nanna, to use such an excuse for your laziness. Surely a goddess would not show her face to a child.” And she turned to the fireplace and blew sparks from the embers to kindle the sticks.

“Wants and wishes and snow-dreams,” grumbled Nanna’s father. But as he spoke, he heard the icicles that hung from the roof beam beginning to drip, and he felt a lessening of the wind that howled about the house, and he turned to the door and wondered.

Nothing more was said, but Nanna kept the feather with her in spring, summer, and fall, and throughout the next harsh winter. Each day, as that winter waned, Nanna would pull her bearskin cloak around her and wonder through the woods. She found plenty of sticks and pine cones, but she never caught a glimpse of either bird or hare. Then, early one morning, something white flashed across the path and bounded into the bushes.

“Stop!” Nanna called, and clapped her hands. But it vanished, like magic, in a whirlwind of snowflakes.

Disappointed, Nanna dropped to her knees to search the bushes. There, pressed into the snow like writing on the wall, were four footprints: two small round ones in front, two large long ones behind. Only a hare could make such tracks.

“You did come back!” cried Nanna.

Then she saw something else. In a nest made of ash twigs was a tiny egg. It was blue, green, and yellow as if it had been rubbed against a rainbow, and it was still warm.

“My hare thinks it’s yet a bird,” exclaimed Nanna. “It has left an egg for me!”

This time, Nanna told no one what had happened. She kept the secret of the magic hare by hiding the egg and waiting in silence for the spring that Eostre had promised.

Soon the sun began to wake a little earlier each day, and a gentle rain washed away the ice and snow. Once again a rainbow arched across the sky, and the people of Midgard knew that Eostre had returned.

Every year thereafter, when the days of winter were almost done, Nanna went into the forest. Though she never again saw the magic hare, she always found the egg that it left her tucked beneath a bush or bramble. When Nanna grew too old to look for the egg, she sent her children to search in the woods, and her grandchildren, and all of

their children. For each child there was always a rainbow-colored egg, because each of them believed the story of Nanna and the bird that became a hare.

Some people think that an enchanted hare still brings eggs at Eastertime, just as it did so very long ago. For Easter gets its name from the goddess Eostre, and today, as then, the coming of Easter means that spring is on its way.