Long Hard Winter

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IT WAS the first snowfall of the winter, and, although it brought enthusiastic joy to the young, the old ones only looked at the sky and shook their heads sadly. The first snow had come early this year and that was a bad sign. One of the few wise ones left had said that it would come earlier every year until the seasons would reverse positions from what they were before the time of the great change. This, he had said, and so they had killed him; for prophecy of what was to come was punishable by death. What future could exist for the young ones, so different from the old ones and each other? No one could remember any two young ones, born of different parents, that had looked alike. It was a world of one-of-a-kinds, those that had survived the ordeal of birth.

The old ones did not stop to watch the sky for long, for there was food to be gotten. Food, the ever present thought that had replaced every other in the mind of man since the time of the great change. Food meant survival, and survival was the basis of everything. The stillborn births would be few this winter, and that meant less food would be coming
from within the family, and the Rules said that no one could kill that which already lived and walked upright. This was punishable by death, as was stealing, prophecy, and the other multitude of crimes inherent in man.

Everyone would participate in the hunt, old and young, sick and healthy. Those that died would be added to the larder, those that lived would return to fight the harshness of the long winter. The hunt would begin the next day. No one would have to be told. It was known by all.

The next morning the great bell, which still stood in the ruin that served as an eating hall and community kitchen, was rung. The ones that could walk came carrying those that could not. At the ruin, those that were crippled or too sick to walk were destroyed in accordance with the Rules and hung high in the ruin to prevent roving animals from poaching them. Then the hefty wood and metal crosses were taken down from the walls and distributed among the assembly. Thus armed, they left the ruin and headed for the great forest, leaving behind them a wide path in the freshly fallen snow.

All the way down the ragged line of people, the chant was picked up from one to another, and each shouted it fiercely, "Over the river and through the woods," over and over again. Some said it was the oldest of chants; one said it was not a chant at all, but he was laughed at. The young ones sang it with the most vigor, and for a few moments were lost in its simplicity.

Each winter the hunting had been worse. Now they had to travel four days before they found any game, and when they did it was only a few paltry rabbits.

They met the Other Tribe the next day. It was a complete surprise. No move was made to injure the Other Tribe, for they walked upright. The Other Tribe swept down from the hillside and slaughtered all.

The next day, in another ruin, a feast was held. The gleaming cross which still stood at the top of the ruin in which they ate was twisted grotesquely, each arm bent to one side.