

# The Spirit of Solstice

# The Spirit of Solstice

[Table of Contents](#)

[I. The Holy Man](#)

[II. Vernal Equinox](#)

[III. Summer Solstice](#)

[IV. Autumnal Equinox](#)

[V. Winter Solstice](#)

[VI. Solstice Stolen](#)



The Spirit of Solstice

I. THE HOLY MAN

# I. The Holy Man

One sleepless night, a young missionary lay awake, staring out through his monastery window. As he admired the night sky, his gaze settled on the North Star. Then, without warning, the angel Gabriel appeared—the same divine messenger who once told Mary she would bear the Son of God. He directed “From the North Star your guidance shall be, to the land of the midnight sun. There you will find those who do not ask what comes after life. Stand among them and see if your faith survives the present.” He had a vision of a village atop a plush hillside and the face of the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

He awoke abruptly to the chirping of songbirds in the tree adjacent to his window, for a new day had begun. He cursed the morning song of nature, for his attempt to fall back into the dream was fruitless. The vividness of the dream kept him from sleeping.

He rushed directly to the bishop to tell of his vision, but the bishop kindly deflected the young clergyman by acknowledging “Brother, you’ve been studying the Gospel excessively. Just like your physical body, your mind also needs time to rest.” His mission to the North was denied.

Letters were drafted, first to the diocese, then to Rome itself. No missionary had ever been sent so far north, but Francis argued his case with eloquence and resolve. Months went by without word, but Francis never lost faith. Then faith answered his call. He received a letter, sealed and signed by Archbishop Nicholas, which granted approval of his mission to the North.

Francis froze at the sight of that signature. He retreated inward, tracing his thoughts back to the beginning—back to the moment his life first seemed to take shape.

As a young novice at Cluny Abbey in France, Francis had shown uncommon promise. He studied the Gospel with fervor, blessed with a near-photographic memory that allowed him to recall scripture with exacting precision. Languages came easily to him, as did an understanding

of the diverse peoples scattered across the Holy Roman Empire. By every measure, he stood at the top of his class.

Word soon reached the abbey that papal representatives from Rome would visit to hear sermons from the candidates. One would be chosen to return with them to the Lateran Palace—the very heart of the Church—for apprenticeship. Francis did not hesitate. He wrote a sermon that came to him as naturally as prayer itself: the life of Jesus Christ as a study in unwavering self-knowledge. He argued that to live as a Christian was to know one's place in this world, so there might be a place for you in the next.

Brother Nicholas, however, was cut from a different cloth. Broad-shouldered and commanding, with a voice that seemed to rise from the earth itself, Nicholas understood the power of performance. Knowing Francis's sermon would leave the deepest mark, he stole it the night before the delegates arrived and committed it to memory. The next morning, Nicholas spoke first—and delivered the words with thunderous conviction.

Francis burned with fury, but lacking proof, he swallowed his outrage and held to his vows. When his turn came, he spoke without notes, improvising a sermon that surpassed every other—except his own. Nicholas was chosen. Francis was sent instead to the British Isles, tasked with converting pagans on the fringes of Christendom.

For decades, Francis lived as the Church demanded: poor, obedient, tireless. He served the destitute, spread the Gospel among Anglo-Saxons and Celts, and asked for nothing in return. Yet somewhere beneath his devotion lingered the quiet belief that such sacrifice would one day be recognized—that Rome would finally call him home. At times, envy stirred when he thought of Nicholas and the life he might have lived. Each time, Francis smothered the feeling and pressed on.

Alone, he crossed the North Sea and trudged through the arduous landscape of Scandinavia, reliving the past and pondering the future. What will happen once I convert these heathens? At the end of this life, would he receive all the treasures of heaven for a successful mission? Though the North Star guided his path night after night, his destination never seemed closer. From his perspective, he did not travel alone; he traveled with faith. It was faith alone that he thrived on, and faith eventually led him to the hillside he envisioned.

The sun sat high in the sky as a single traveler approached from the south. It was summer in the Laplands, which is now northern Finland. A small portion of the indigenous people of the land, mostly women and children, sat in front of their lavvus watching as the stranger trekked up the plush green hillsides making his way closer to their settlement. Settling in such a remote region, it was not very often the villagers were graced with visitors. As word of the traveler spread throughout the tiny village, the group of spectators grew. Further up the hillside, even a herd of grazing reindeer stopped to observe. All eyes were on the stranger.

He wore a robe once made of fine silk with the Christian cross ornately embroidered on the lapels. The bottom of the now sun-faded and tattered robe revealed something that resembled fine leather-bound sandals, which now had countless miles on their worn-out soles. His beard unkempt, his unwashed face dirty, the wrinkles on his face deep from wincing at the sun. The journey had taken its toll upon the weary traveler. Though tired, his stride was steadfast and purposeful, each step led by an ornate staff, bearing a crucifix made of polished silver glistening in the sun. His only other belonging, a satchel wrapped around his torso.

The stranger stopped before the gathering and laid down his staff. Reaching out his hands, palms up to show he meant no malice. Softly, he spoke, “In nomine Patris et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti” while making the sign of the cross. The stranger continued to ask in Latin “Have

you heard the good news?” He received no greeting, whether friendly or aggressive. The villagers stoically stared back, prompting him to ask the same question over and over in different languages. The Sami, being from an isolated territory spoke their own language, which the traveler would have been hard pressed to have known. A woman from the crowd pushed forward and responded in Old Norse “What is this good news you bring us stranger? The only news we have heard of your cross is one of violent atrocities.” The traveler’s eyes widened as the woman strikingly resembled the woman from his dream, but he kept his composure. The stranger assured the crowd “I come in peace to spread the word of Jesus Christ, King of the Jews, the Son of God, who sacrificed himself for our sins, bestowing himself as savior of all mankind. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. You can have eternal salvation and everlasting life. All you have to do is praise the Lord.” The woman answered “What is it that you want from us, Holy Man?” The Holy Man answered “My simple wish is that you hear my story.” The women agreed and gathered in the center of the village.

Since he observed the village was filled mostly with women, he strategically chose a specific passage from the Bible from his abbey lessons, knowing their maternal nature would embrace it. The missionary passionately delivered the story of the Nativity. With vigor and enthusiasm, he came to the resolution that the Magi were called upon to follow the brightest star in the sky, which led them north, directly to the manger where the baby Jesus lay swaddled and sleeping peacefully on that silent night. The Holy Man then made his segue by informing the Sami that the angel Gabriel, the same angel that began the story of Jesus, personally paid him a visit a long time ago. The angel told him to follow the most luminous star in the sky, like the Magi, and continue each night until the star disappeared.

He explained that since he had set off on his journey several months ago the light of day had lengthened little by little until three days ago, when the sun never set. Thus, not a star was visible as the darkness of night never arrived. The Holy Man admitted he did not know where he was going, only following the path of faith. The emphatic conclusion of his divine mission delivered him exactly to their village, explaining that God had selected the Sami as his chosen people. “Are you ready to accept the Lord Jesus Christ as your own personal savior?”

The silence became deafening to the Holy Man. Confused as to why the angel of God would send him here only to be answered with silence, all the while remaining calm, he asked “When are the men of the village to return?” The woman pointed to the opposite side of the hill overlooking the sea where several fishing vessels were returning.

The crowd of women dispersed to go prepare the catch of the day. The Holy Man kept a watchful eye over the woman from his vision, but cautiously did not approach. She whispered in the ear of an elder of the village. Her message caused the elder to stare directly at the Holy Man. Suddenly he found himself surrounded by the men of the village, returned from their fishing excursion.

The men were much less welcoming and surrounded the Holy Man demanding “When will your army arrive, messenger?” The obvious tension led him to assure the men he was a lone, peaceful traveler. Requesting that if his hosts were gracious enough, he could perhaps tell them one story. The group of men began to grow aggressive, but then the surrounding circle parted as the elder of the village shuffled past to meet the stranger. Immediate silence and tensions cleared over the crowd as the elder spoke “Traveler, you look weary. I know all too well the burden

being away from home can bear on oneself. You are welcome as my guest for our feast. Afterwards, we will hear your story.” The crowd dispersed.

The famished Holy Man devoured his plate of fish, fowl, bread, fruits and vegetables. His one untold complaint was there was no wine, for grapes were not fond of the short growing season of the region. The substitute being the Sami’s grog, a fermented tonic of grain and bog myrtle, which the men of the village were swilling down. An attempt was made to swallow the concoction but, much to his chagrin, he could not stomach such an unsophisticated beverage. When the feast was over the Holy Man did not hesitate to ask for his turn to preach to the congregation.

The entire Sami tribe gathered around the fire listening to the tales of their guest attentively. Just as the missionary knew that a story of the miraculous birth of Jesus would resonate with the female contingent, he knew that the male ego would connect with the story of Jesus’ resurrection. Once again he preached, culminating with “He suffered, died and was buried. On the third day he rose again, to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom shall have no end.” The Holy Man then fervently proposed that all the tribe had to do was take the word of the Lord as their own. Accepting the one true God, they would be granted everlasting life after their spirits had abandoned their earthly bodies and joined in the kingdom of heaven to walk side by side with Jesus for eternal salvation.

The Holy Man could already envision the mass baptism ritual taking place tomorrow morning in the waters of the sea. Unfortunately, the concept of a single all-seeing, all-knowing God was foreign to the Sami. Although the Holy Man took great pride in the delivery of his

gospel, the Sami did not share the same passion. The crowd continued their celebration of the summer solstice. The Holy Man sat quietly contemplating what his next angle might be.

Typically, he could leverage the vast resources of the Holy Roman Empire to sway a village council, but the Sami proved immune to such tactics. They faced no threat of invasion that required his protection, nor did they crave the gold and gemstones he might offer. Perfectly content in their isolation, the elders took pride in enduring the brutal winters alone. Cut off from civilization, the Holy Man found himself empty-handed, with nothing of value to offer a people who already had everything they needed.

The beat of the Sami drums was heard as the elders began to chant. Others joined in their traditional dance around the fire, while the rest of the village, along with the Holy Man, admired from their seats. Lost in contemplation, he did not notice the female from his vision sit down beside him. She was naturally beautiful, with fair skin, dark brown hair and bright green eyes. Well within childbearing years, yet she had no children at her side like the other Sami women. She said, smiling kindly, “Thank you for your stories, and please don’t be disappointed.” We, Sami, are strong-willed. It is in our blood, instilled by enduring our harsh winters. The elders are skeptical of outsiders and have little patience for their influence.” The Holy Man sullenly nodded, acknowledging his failure. “As a little girl, I had died once before. I witnessed the heaven you spoke of, but a Spirit brought me back to life. Hearing your story of the Virgin Mary today, I hope I may be the reason for your journey. I would like to tell you my story, if you’d be so kind as to listen.” Intrigued by this synopsis, the Holy Man delightfully agreed as he noticed the potential to convert the young woman as she might be looking for answers for salvation. Perhaps his lost mission might actually have a purpose after all.





Vernal Equinox

## II. Vernal Equinox

My name is Flora, and these are my first memories as a young girl. For generations, our village has followed an ancestral custom: every year, one man is chosen to journey west to a remote trading post. His mission is to meet the “Norsemen of the Sea,” bartering our furs and skins for exotic wares brought from parts unknown. No one remembers why this specific post was chosen, only that the Norsemen refuse to travel a single step further toward our village. The stakes of this journey are high. A tradesman who returns with enough to satisfy the village’s needs earns a coveted seat on the Council of Elders. But the cost is often blood; the wilderness is unforgiving, and many who leave never return.

When the lottery fell to my father, I had no idea his duty would reshape my destiny. That journey didn’t just take me to a trading post; it took me to the place where I died and went to heaven—and it was there that I first learned the tongue of the Norse.

As a little girl, I remember Father being big and strong, but in reality he was of average build at best. He made up for his stature with relentless hard work. Every morning he woke to contribute to provide for our village. As an avid fisherman, he was an adept angler. He also had extensive experience trapping small game and sowing the fields when weather allowed. Father always had aspirations to provide for his fellow villagers and looked forward to his duty. He knew that if his hard work and perseverance paid off, he could be the youngest member on the council ever. Only one thing stood in his way, Mother.

Father was the luckiest man in the village to have her at his side. Mother was beautiful, quiet and kind, but also stubborn and unrelenting. Mother refused to allow Father to live alone for an entire year. She knew she could perform duties Father may have fallen short on in order to

persevere. She was a fine cook of all dishes, no matter what little ingredients were provided for her. She was capable of tanning hides and making furs. Mother eventually wore him down and persuaded Father to allow all of us to occupy the trading post.

As the snowpack finally surrendered to the spring thaw, my parents, our dog Musti, and I began the long trek toward our new homestead. I can still feel the chill of that slushy hike; the mornings were biting and sharp, but the climbing sun would quickly turn the world soft and warm.

We traveled light, carrying little more than the clothes on our backs and enough dried rations to see us through. Our only true cargo was a heavy sack of furs—the currency my father would use to begin his bartering.

Musti led our small procession. She was the bravest, most loyal soul I have ever known, with a thick black coat that defied the winter and ears that never stopped searching the wind. With her keen sense of smell, she would vanish into the brush, zigzagging through the trees only to reappear moments later with a partridge or pheasant in her jaws. Though I struggled to keep pace—often finding myself hoisted onto Father’s shoulders—Musti was my constant shadow. Each night, I fell into a deep, exhausted sleep with her warmth curled tight against my side. After days of walking, we finally reached the valley. There, standing before a lonely lavvu, we found the man who had held the post for the last year. The look on his face was one of pure, breathless elation; he was a man finally relieved of his watch.

The moment we arrived, the former occupant whisked Father away to survey the land. I quickly grew bored, the drone of their technical advice fading into the background—until the stories of the Norsemen began.

The trader spoke of them with such gravity that my imagination ran wild. In my mind, these “men of the sea” morphed into towering monsters, the kind of creatures that would haunt my dreams for weeks to come. I couldn’t understand why we had ventured so deep into the wilderness just to wait on such ruthless barbarians.

However, the “why” became clear when the man revealed his spoils. He laid out the supplies he had gathered over the past year—treasures unlike anything I had ever seen. In my wide-eyed curiosity, I reached out to touch the gleaming blade of a scythe, a masterpiece of ironwork far beyond the skill of any Sami blacksmith. My hand was immediately swatted away with a sharp reprimand, and I was shooed out the door to find my own entertainment in the dirt.

Musti and I set out to explore the bounds of our new world. Our lavvu sat nestled in a vast valley between two towering peaks, overlooking hundreds of acres of thawing tundra that bled into a distant, dark forest.

The home was well-placed, situated near a river fed by mountain springs. At this time of year, the water was a violent, roaring force; the spring melt had turned the winding channel into a series of whitecaps that hissed and tumbled through the valley’s switchbacks. I climbed atop a massive, slick boulder to peer into the churn, searching for the flash of spawning salmon. Musti, sensing the danger, barked incessantly at my heels, her frantic warning echoing off the stone. The mist from the current had turned the rock into a slide. As I leaned over the edge, my feet went out from under me. A jolt of pure adrenaline shot through my limbs—I was certain the river would claim me.

Suddenly, I felt a pair of strong arms lift me, hoisting me away from the precipice like a guardian angel. It wasn’t my time for heaven just yet; the departing tradesman had spotted my

recklessness just in time.

He knelt to my level. Burning with shame, I kept my eyes fixed on my soaking wet boots, bracing for the scolding I knew I deserved. Instead, he gently tilted my chin up until our eyes met.

“My, what a mischievous little girl you are,” he said, his voice a mix of amusement and gravity. “I must warn you: this post is no place for a wandering child. The Norse say a Spirit lives in these mountains, a watcher of the woods who keeps vigil over the valley. Whatever you do, never stray beyond this meadow without your parents, or else.”

I was terrified, yet utterly enthralled. My curiosity, true to form, overcame my fear. “Is the Spirit good or evil?” I whispered. The man stood, his shadow towering over me. “I suppose a bit of both,” he replied. “It depends entirely on the circumstances of your encounter.” My parents shared a knowing smile, grateful for his cautionary tale. From then on, I kept a constant watch on the treeline, searching for a glimpse of the Spirit, but Musti and I were careful to never test the boundaries of the meadow again.

Fewer than two weeks passed before their arrival. One afternoon, as the sun lingered low on the horizon, Musti was the first to sense them. She barked toward the mountain across the valley, her hackles raised.

The Norsemen appeared in single file, cresting the ridge before descending into the meadow below. They were giants—fiery red hair, massive beards, bodies twice the size of any man I had ever seen. Many bore the marks of battle: jagged scars, missing limbs, eyepatches covering ruined eyes. The traders’ stories had not prepared me for this. What marched toward us felt less like men and more like an invasion of ogres, creatures born of fevered dreams. Terror

rooted me in place. I hid behind Mother, unable to look at them as they approached. Even Musti, the bravest dog I had ever known, tucked her tail and cowered by the lavvu's entrance.

The Norse marched in silence, heads high, their composure unwavering. Gracious in the presence of their host, each warrior stepped forward bearing a single item for trade, goods from lands far beyond our knowing.

The group revealed the offerings one by one, demonstrating their ease of use and craftsmanship. Mother marveled at the spices, while Father sifted through a satchel of precious metals and stones that glittered in the firelight, tempting him for a fleeting moment, but Father dismissed them at once, luxuries had no place in survival. Words between Father and the Norse were few; most bartering was done through gestures, nods of agreement, and firm shakes of refusal.

Last came the chieftain, the one who spoke our tongue best. In his hand he held a strange device he called a compass. A thing of sorcery, whose arrow always faced true north. He explained that though his people guided themselves by the North Star, storms often obscured the heavens. Father smiled politely and refused. He had no intention of leaving the valley and knew its paths by heart. The chieftain cautioned the Tradesman, "You'd be surprised how easily a man can lose himself in this land." In the end, Father traded all of Mother's furs for the iron spade, as well as the hooks and reel of a fly fishing rod, knowing these would bring more sustenance than any glittering trinket.

Mother prepared every scrap of food we had. These men were immense, and their appetites matched their size. After laying out the feast, she retreated into the lavvu and did not return. She fed them well, for she did not want any alternative appetite focused on her. They

spoke little as they ate. Their barbarism revealed itself as they tore flesh from roasted fish, snapping spines and spitting rib bones into the fire. Though not overindulgent, it took such sustenance to fuel men so large. In less than an hour, all of Father's labor since our arrival was gone.

Afterward, they passed a canteen of mead around the fire. From my hiding place beside the lavvu, I listened. It was then I first understood fragments of Old Norse. With slow words and sweeping gestures, they told Father of distant lands, describing the wonders of the ancient world; sending my imagination soaring.

They spoke of voyage after voyage, of trade welcomed by some and resisted by others. Though they called themselves merchants, they admitted freely that their wares were gained by friendship or force, barter or beating—many, once owned by men who no longer lived. Father listened, enthralled. Part of him dreamed of seeing the world alongside them, but he knew himself too well. He was a farmer and a fisherman, not a warrior. At some point, I drifted into sleep. I awoke the next morning inside the lavvu. Slipping outside, I searched for the Norsemen, but only cold ashes remained where they had slept.

This became a seasonal rhythm. Every month they returned, greeting Father before displaying an array of exotic wares. Once the bartering concluded, they would feast upon Mother's cooking, eventually settling around the fire to swap stories over drink. With every visit, our family grew richer in both supplies and language. Our small settlement flourished under this newfound productivity, and almost before we realized it, the season of the midnight sun was upon us.



The Spirit of Solstice

III. SUMMER SOLSTICE

### III. Summer Solstice

With so much daylight and the fact that Mother and Father were ahead of schedule on their chores, there was quite a bit of playtime during that summer. Once a day, Mother would take me to the river where a few boulders slowed the flow of water, creating a perfectly calm swimming hole. This is where I learned how to swim. The weather was so pleasant in our little meadow. Every night during dinner, Mother and Father flirted lovingly as I would enjoy every bite of my meal. After dinner, they would dance in the meadow, as Musti and I did our best to imitate them. Even though Mother had fretted about occupying the trading post, it had drawn us closer as a family. These are some of my fondest memories.

The memory of the Norse sitting amongst us is imprinted in my head. I remember Father becoming braver with the Norsemen and felt a camaraderie amongst them, so much so he insisted they hold off on trade until after the feast. He figured that perhaps they'd be more favorable of the value of his furs and skins on a full stomach. After the feast, he shared in the swilling of mead, and when it came time for bartering, his intoxication had him feeling sentimental. He passed on the tools and once again on the silks. He spent quite some time sifting through the sack of jewels. Trying on rings and necklaces. Peering through the clarity of the diamonds. But in the end, he justified trading for spices, earthen cookware and a cast iron cauldron for Mother to cook with as a gift for her relentless pursuit to keep the family together through his duty at the trading post. Needless to say, Mother was flattered and elated by the gesture.

Father's love of the Viking's mead also led him into inquiring a bit more than his usual reserved self would. I remember Father asking why the Norse would travel all the way up into

the mountains here just to trade at our campsite. The Norse chieftain responded "Odin led our forefathers here many generations ago. For the Spirit in the mountain provides us with our potion." Father asked for a further description of the "potion".

The Norse described it as an intoxicating potion, but not in the sense of their mead. When under the effects of the potion, memories of the past and projections of the future fade. Easing their burden, if only temporarily, allowed them to see beyond the veil of experience. Warriors who had performed some of the most gruesome acts a man could envision and buried brothers. Their physical wounds, once bandaged, heal naturally over time, but the wounds of their spirit require care as well."

Mystified about what the Norse were speaking of, Father informed the Norse that he had explored every acre of the surrounding lands for miles and miles, but was not familiar with any spirit, and perhaps the message got lost in translation. The Norse chieftain mysteriously informed my father that "it knows of you, but you will never see it unless by its will." He smirked for a moment and then grew stern "But we will speak no more of the Spirit!" This left Father speechless and thus the conversation ended.

In between the seasonal visits from the Norse, life in the valley settled into a predictable, yet beautiful, rhythm. My days were largely tethered to Mother, while Father grew consumed by his labor. He worked with a feverish intensity, driven by the knowledge that every extra bushel or hide increased his leverage when the trading commenced.

Though he believed the grueling work of a man was no place for a child, Mother had a way of softening his resolve. Eventually, she convinced him to take me foraging. He allowed with a single, stern condition; I was never to lag behind.

On our first excursion, we trekked across the sun-drenched meadow and into the deep shadows of the woodland. There, Father unearthed a hidden patch of wild ramps. We returned home with our prize, and that evening, Mother transformed them into a fish stew so savory it felt like a celebration. Even Father, usually stoic and focused on the future, was moved by the meal. Between mouthfuls, he declared that this was the dish Mother would prepare to impress the Norse upon their return.

Upon the last visit of the summer, Father had grown even more comfortable with the Norsemen, so much so that he imbibed lavishly in the Viking Mead. Father joined the other men in the feast, claiming to the Norsemen that the fish stew would be the most delightful dish they'd have, no matter how far they traveled. "You'll be back trading me rubies and emeralds for an extra spoonful of this stew." He boasted.

Father tasted his first mouthful of stew and was disgusted with its overwhelming blandness. He barged into the lavvu and demanded of Mother why her stew was slop "The Norsemen do not want to trade their finest goods if we do not please their appetite! Where is the stew you made for us last time?" Mother, ashamedly informed him "I used ramps in another recipe, and I swore I had more, but there were none left when I was making the stew." Infuriated, Father went to finish the feast and commence with trading.

After the feast, Father was too intoxicated to trade with any skill. From afar, I watched the silent exchange. Father pointed to a prize, but the Norseman shook his head, rejecting the offer. Instead he portioned out a small collection of jewels instead. In a reckless move, Father surrendered his entire stock of furs for the tiny pouch, which he lunged to hide within his tunic.

He stumbled back to the lavvu empty-handed and bitter. Rather than face his own failure, he turned his venom on Mother, blaming her "tasteless" stew for the poor deal before instantly falling into a deep slumber.

Father was so irate with Mother the night before blaming her stew for lackluster bartering. I knew if I brought back more ramps, everyone would be happy again. So I grabbed my satchel and set off across the dew-covered meadow.

Once I entered the forest, the tree canopy blocked out much of the light. I did not have Father or Musti, but I braved on regardless. I was about halfway to the ramps when suddenly I heard a rumbling growl of some beastly woodland creature coming from off in the near distance. I ran for my life. I could hear branches snapping as the animal gained ground on me. I could see the daylight shining marking the end of the forest. I was sure that I could make it without the beast catching me when I stumbled over a root and fell to the forest floor.

I looked up to see the creature that would evidently bring my demise. It had the head and horns of a goat, the body of a giant man, all covered in hair. Its long tongue hung from its gaping fang-filled mouth, drooling for the flesh of a young child. Its sharp claws prepared to slice me to ribbons as it bounded toward me. My only defense was to hide my face in the ground in fright. Suddenly I felt a large object hurdle over my body toward the beast. As I peeked up, I discovered Musti had come to my defense. Running towards the meadow, I heard a ferocious battle going on. I called for Musti to return, but she was fighting the beast. I continued running home crying.

Upon my entrance to the lavvu, Mother immediately noticed I was frightened and asked what had happened. I explained how I wanted to surprise her and Father with fresh ramps. Then I told her of the Evil Spirit of the Mountain and how Musti had saved me. Mother could see how

frightened I was and assured me that there was no Spirit of the forest and that the tradesman had just told me that story to scare me from wandering off on my own. She could see I was not convinced and explained my imagination simply ran wild. The horned figure I encountered in the woods was merely a deer, and it had no fangs or claws. Father showed little concern. He simply held his head in his hands and moved about slowly. He said that she would return when she found her way home. Then he ushered me back outside, ordering me to be quiet because he had a headache. I sat patiently, intertwining a crown of wild flowers waiting for my friend, my protector's triumphant return.

After dinner that night, Mother sent me out to call for Musti, but warned me not to go far. As I exited the lavvu, I overheard Mother inquiring of Father on his empty-handed bartering from the previous day. When Father was questioned, he became irate all over again. He scolded Mother that he does all the work and deserves something for himself every once in a while. He reminded her of her new cookware from the previous visit and that he could barter that back with the Norsemen if she felt it fit. His last words were a warning not to question his judgments again. As I watched towards the forest for Musti's return, I noticed Father all alone standing in the fields. Concern replaced the elation that had once graced his face as he stood in the garden over a wilted crop that had little a chance for survival with no rain.

As the summer sun continued to sink lower in the sky night after night, the meadow turned from the plush green of early summer to a crispy amber and gold. Slowly throughout the summer, the level of the water in our river had digressed to where swimming lessons ceased. There were no longer fish swimming downstream, and without crops to feed the Norse they would not stop visiting our camp. Thus rendering his duty of tradesman a failure. We could not return to the village early nor without the wares gained from the Norse. It also left my family in

dire danger with the winter months just on the horizon. Father told myself and Mother we had best pray to the gods for rain. Flora confided in the Holy Man, her eyes welling with tears “I remember crying myself to sleep that night. Though Father’s concern was with rain, my only prayer to your God or any god that would hear, was to have Musti playing with me in the meadow again; be it flourishing with rain or wilting by the sun. I had horrible nightmares night after night. Some involved the beast holding Musti captive in his lair; some ended even more tragically.”



The Spirit of Solstice

IV. AUTUMNAL EQUINOX

## IV. Autumnal Equinox

Summer in the Laplands is short, and just as fast as it had begun, things were drawing to a close. The trees soon followed the path of the meadow. Over a month's time, the green leaves turned brilliant hues of orange, red, and yellow. The crisp morning air soon warmed as the sun rose in the sky, with the chill returning as soon as the sun set behind the mountain. A prominent sign of the changing of the seasons was the even split between daylight and the darkness of night. The Norse arrived for their monthly visit just as dusk set in one evening.

I watched as the warriors marched single file through the meadow, and as they grew closer, I noticed a small figure trotting alongside the Chieftain. I wondered, could it be? And before I could wonder anymore the tiny figure sprinted directly towards me. I ran as fast as my little legs could carry me. My friend and protector, Musti, had returned home! I wrapped my arms around her neck as she frantically licked my face.

As the Chieftain approached, he informed Father the Spirit of the Mountain had come across Musti and she had sustained some wounds in her battle. A piece was missing from her pointy right ear, and fur had just started to grow back around a wound healing on her hind leg. I looked up to Mother and exclaimed "See, I told you the evil Spirit was a beast." Then the Chieftain expressed some sentiment "Spirit said her physical wounds needed healing, but her heart needs no medicine. She had shown unconditional love the entire time she'd been healing."

Father had little patience for the Chieftain's words and hurried the Norsemen to trade. When they revealed no precious metals or stones, his interest faltered. He bartered halfheartedly, then turned his attention to the feast. Mother emptied what little food she had saved for

winter—rabbit and rodent for the spit—and Father explained that drought had left the river barren and the game gone south. He admitted, plainly, that we might not survive the winter.

The Norsemen were displeased. The Chieftain, colder than the rest, offered to pray for us and ordered Father from the lavvu. We were to sleep outside. Father raged but knew better than to resist.

The Norse entered the lavvu and built a great fire. Smoke poured from the vent, turning the skins amber and alive with shadow. Musti and I crept close. The Chieftain raised a horn and saluted “Norsemen, we stand at summer’s edge. May the light of this night shine with you through the long dark, until the sun greets us again.” One by one, the men drank in silence. It was not revelry, but ritual.

Some remained by the fire. Others disappeared into the forest. A chant began—low, then layered as other joined in—until it merged into a single, steady tone. The smoke lifted in a narrow column, rising and thinning as if imitating the sound. I turned to see if my parents noticed, but they were arguing—about exile, about Father’s failures. The chanting stopped.

The men returned with a carcass and set it to roast. The smell drove Father into fresh anger; any game here, he believed, belonged to him. As he moved toward the lavvu, the Chieftain emerged and offered a butchered deer’s leg. He said it was a gift, and that they had asked the gods for rain.

Father’s anger vanished. He asked to join their rite. The Chieftain said it would cost Father his sack of jewels. Father refused. The Chieftain only said they would return next month,

expecting a feast once the rains came, and reminded Father he was an outsider with no place among them that night.

I fell asleep hungry but content, dreaming of the stew Mother would make from the deer's leg. Musti curled beside me, and for that night, it was enough.

The next morning I woke to an outburst as Father exclaimed, "Rain! I felt a drop of RAAAIINNNNN!!!" He manically erupted in boisterous laughter as the rain grew from a drizzle to a downpour. My family hurried for shelter inside the lavvu where the Norse's fire from the night before still smouldered. While Mother prepared the venison stew, Father and I played games. Father was in the best spirits he'd been in for months. As the darkness of night set in, the downpour grew to a deluge. The sound of the rain against the skins of the lavvu lulled me peacefully into the deepest slumber a child with a full belly and loving family could sleep. Unfortunately, the ease felt in our lavvu was only temporary.

A splash of water woke me in the middle of my slumber, as Mother frantically hoisted me from my bed. I could hear Father screaming chaotically, as he hurried to salvage whatever belongings he could. As I looked down, I could see Mother was standing in knee-deep water. She ran me through the flooded meadow and into the forest, evacuating our lavvu. He made it far up the mountainside before he stopped to catch his breath. We looked down into the valley as we watched the levee give way to the rushing waters, washing our lavvu along with all our belongings away downriver. The rain had extinguished the mood of earlier in the day. We took shelter under the dense evergreens and huddled together for warmth.

I woke the next morning being carried down the mountain back to our settlement. The water washed our lavvu downstream, and layers of silt covered the garden that wanted rain.

Mother cried hysterically, begging Father to return to our village. Without hesitation, Father denied any such proposal. Mother pleaded with him, but Father grew intolerant of her voice, grabbing her by the arms as he shook her violently, placing the blame on her “This was my mission! However, you tagged along even though no one invited you. You’ve put yourself and your child in this situation. Leave if you wish, but I will stay and carry out my duty!” From then on, there was silence among us.

Some good fortune blessed us over the next few days, the floodwaters had forced fish back upstream, and Father could fish again. Musti and I knew the stress my parents were under, so we remained quiet, keeping warm by the fire. The cold was setting in. The rains had washed away the array of amber and gold leaves that had decorated the valley, revealing a horizon filled with sticks. Grey clouds filled the sky, and the emerald of the coniferous trees lining the mountain was the only remaining color.

Over the next few weeks, my parents worked tirelessly to rebuild our settlement. Father reconstructed the lavvu, now sturdier than ever. Mother stayed busy smoking fish over the fire. When a one-week supply of fish had built up, Mother suggested to Father that he bring me foraging in the forest as a reward for my good behavior.

Reluctantly, Father, Musti, and I set out early the next morning with our bellies full of smoked trout. Father sternly warned me this would not be fun and games and that I would need to keep pace. The floodwaters decimated much of the small game, leaving Father’s traps empty. The arrival of cold weather had stopped the blossoming of berries, but we were able to retrieve a small amount of nuts.

From time to time, Musti would catch a scent of something. With her nose in the air, she’d let out a few barks, her tail wagging as if the scent was familiarly friendly. Father quickly

grew tired of the interruption, calling her back and silenced her. Our foraging excursion would have been fruitless if it hadn't been for the moist conditions left behind by the flood.

Mushrooms were abundant on the forest floor. Father warned of many being toxic and of those that could not be identified, we must err on the side of caution. My satchel overflowed with edible mushrooms, but one mushroom caught my attention. Its large, bright red cap covered in white polka dots stood out among the drab shades of grey throughout the landscape. I bent down and picked it from the earth. Father immediately knocked it from my hands and reprimanded that it would poison me.

Unbeknownst to the father and daughter duo, a set of eyes was observing them from a distance. The creature, larger than the average man, burly and bearded, dressed in furs, wearing the hide of a badger as a hood that hid his face. It also carried a large sack and had been watching the two through the woods, keeping a safe distance as to avoid detection. As the two moved forth through the woods, the watcher followed their path. It stopped upon the mushroom the little girl had dropped, slowly bending down it picked it up with its grizzly-sized hands. Opening its sack, it added to the collection of red-capped, white-polka-dotted mushrooms. The watcher continued to follow until the smell of campfire became evidently close. The watcher stopped in his path and observed Mother greet her husband and child from their adventure. When the family entered their lavvu, the watcher went upon his way back into the depths of the forest.

Back at the lavvu, I proudly unveiled my booty. Mother was so happy to see me, so happy. She then took the chanterelles from my satchel and added them to the soup. Mother rewarded my fortune with a new fur coat she had made for me while we were in the forest. She said that the temperatures soon would not be rising with the sun and that I would need this for the dark months to come. It fit perfectly. It had been a long day in the forest with Father, and I

had not realized how tired I was. Musti and I fell sound asleep as soon as I swallowed my last mouthful of mushroom soup.

Meanwhile, the watcher from the woods was arriving back to its shelter, a cave that lay near the mountain's peak. It stood at the opening of the cave, then turned to the open forest. With a raise of the head, a whistle of a short melody carried out to the sky. The same whistle to the east, then whistled the same melody to the west, and once more to the south, then waited. The eyes of the watcher looked out through the dense pines, waiting for a response to the song. After a long pause, the watcher faces back towards the east and blows two notes of his melody out, only to be interrupted not just by a rustling of leaves, but a snapping of branches.

A reindeer appeared from the pines. While playfully trotting, the reindeer seemed glad to see the mysterious figure at the sound of the whistled tune. Moments after, another appeared, and another was heard approaching from off in the distance. All three congregated as they halted, now face to face with the watcher. The enormous figure stood just as tall as the rack on the animal. Looking down upon the animal, making direct eye contact, the watcher pulled a piece of mushroom from the sack. He raised the offering high to the sky and then gifted the first reindeer a bite of mushroom. He fed the reindeer one by one, repeating the same ceremonial offering. The reindeer graciously ruminated, savoring each and every morsel. The figure was sure to offer his guests plentiful water from a horn-shaped canteen with every round of treats. Astoundingly, more reindeer arrived to join in. When the mushrooms were all gone, the host delivered every last drop of water to the eight reindeer that had miraculously visited the stranger. The mushrooms seem to have a euphoric, uplifting effect on the large animals, much like catnip to a feline. The reindeer giddily played with each other. Their hooves daintily stomped and racks tactfully tussled amongst each other. The stranger gleefully observed his pets for a while, then grabbed his torch

and entered the cave. Only to reemerge a few brief moments later with several more drinking horn canteens. The stranger gently approached the first reindeer to the rear and placed the horn underneath the large animal's nether region. The reindeer then relieved himself into the canteen. When the canteen was full, the stranger capped the horn tightly with a wooden plug and hung the horn by its strap on a tree branch. One by one he repeated the actions until he had eight drinking horns full of reindeer urine hanging from the trees. The stranger completed collecting all the canteens and entered the cave for the rest of the evening. The reindeer eventually playfully make their way back through the pines and into the forest.

Weeks went by quickly as our family recovered from the flood. Late one afternoon chores were interrupted by the surprise return of the Norse. Father was elated to acknowledge the fact that the Norse rain ceremony had brought on rain, maybe too much rain, but there would be ample fish to feed the entire pilgrimage. The Norse were delighted and provided many useful options for trade.

He took a great interest in the Viking weapons they carried with them. Although the Sami had no enemies to defend themselves against, Father still admired the swords they carried. Etched and engraved with an intricate knot work design on the hilt. The blade was long, glistening in the reflection of the setting sun. No Norseman would ever consider trading his own arms for what the Sami offered, but this time there was a spare sword with the wares spread about. Father inquired about the weapon, asking what he would have to trade in order to obtain the sword. He picked it up, and it was much heavier than he expected. He attempted to wield the weapon as he had seen in the Norse training during many of the nights before. Comparatively, Father looked like a fumbling buffoon, as he had never swung a sword before, which drew a roar of laughter from the Norse.

The Chieftain let father know it would take every hide and morsel of food we have to secure the sword for his own. Knowing Father had no need for the sword and was just enthralled with it as a symbol of power, he strongly suggested perhaps this long-handled spear. "This would be more useful for your skill-set." He handed the spear over and told him "If you in fact need to defend yourself, you'll have a much better chance from a distance rather than in hand-to-hand combat from what you just displayed. Though if I were you, I would suggest using it for large game. You're still a few men short of conquering an empire!" All the Norsemen erupted in laughter. And at that point, Mother remained quiet, doing her due diligence, and served the prepared feast, though she did not approve of Father's bartering.

The next morning, the Norsemen headed back south, and as they did, the north wind had followed. As late fall weather advanced into early winter conditions, the cold snap did not let up. Ice formation on the river slowed the supply of fish, and as the snow piled on, so did the tension in our little lavvu.

The struggle to provide food for the family left Father feeling dismayed, inadequate and insecure. Mother stopped asking Father if he had any luck at fish or game, as often his empty-handed response only raised his temper, to where Mother barely even spoke anymore. When Father came home, Mother would do her chores, and silence would fall over the lavvu.

I remember growing weak as the nights grew long. The sun was allowing perhaps only an hour or two of daylight at a time. I was in a catatonic state, sleeping most of the day away. Mother would melt snow over the fire for drinking water, but there was very little to eat during this period.

The one thing that lifted my spirits was the Norsemen again. Their numbers were fewer, and their furs were thicker this trek. Still, there was not enough food to offer even this small gathering. Upon hearing this, the chieftain denied the trading of any Norse wares. He said they would sleep in the lavvu for the night to keep warm and be on their way in the morning.

Before leaving in the morning, I could overhear Father ask the Norse for help. He told them it was not possible for him and his family to survive the winter in these conditions. He asked if they could pray to Odin for good fortune in the hunt. The Chieftain responded, saying that Odin would grant no one who was not Norse with fortune. The last suggestion for Father before they departed was to provide an offering for the Spirit as the Chieftain pointed to the peak of the mountain. I lay in bed growing weaker by the hour. The last thing I remember is Mother and Father arguing. The merriment of summer was merely a memory.

Flora's eyes shone as she confided in the Holy Man. "It was then that I saw the heaven you spoke of," she whispered. "The pain in my belly—the ache of starvation—simply vanished. I felt no hunger, no discomfort at all. I was weightless, floating. Even with my eyes closed, I saw a light brighter than anything I have known, a living dance of colors I have never seen since. It should have blinded me, yet I did not squint, for there was no pain. It was like gazing into the abyss, but its opposite. Not nothingness, but everything. I have never known such peace. I do not know how long I was there, only that it felt like an eternity."

Flora lowered her gaze. "An angel also visited me." He saved me from starvation; I can still remember seeing him fall from the sky. He provided Mother with the food to bring me back to life," she said. "Then, that angel gave my father a mission for me, but it was one I could not

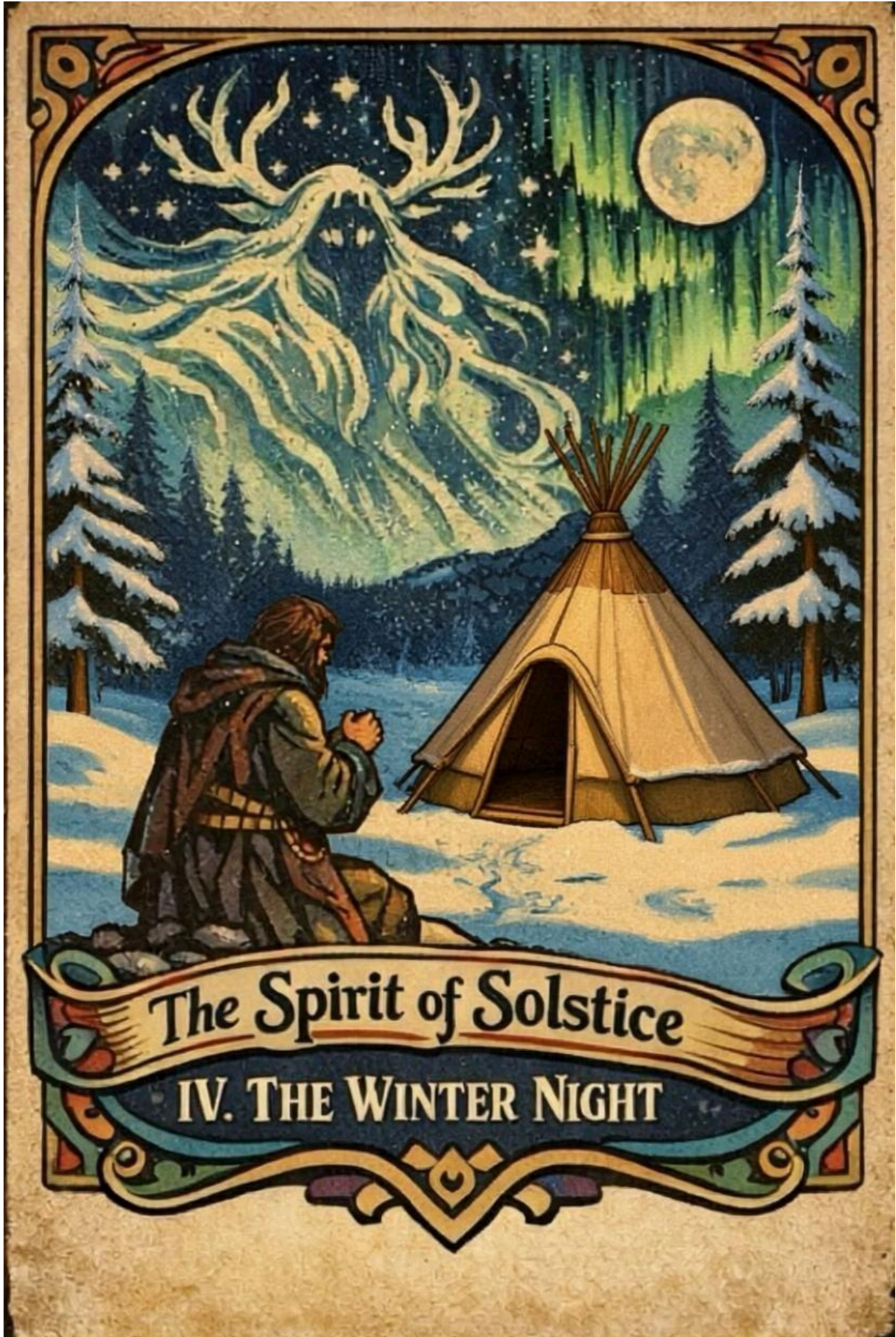
fulfill. The hunger I suffered as a child left me barren. I have never bled, and so I have never wed. No Saami man will take a wife who cannot bear him children.”

She hesitated, then lifted her eyes again. “After hearing your story of the Virgin Mary, I cannot help but wonder if I am the virgin meant to deliver the second coming of your Jesus Christ. Perhaps that is why heaven sent me back all those years ago.” She looked up at the Holy Man, searching his face, asking without words whether he had come to give her a child.

She placed her hands atop his. The contact was simple, almost reverent, yet it sent a strange unease through him—not desire, but the sudden awareness of being seen, of being chosen. It stirred something in him that no scripture had ever cultivated, something warm and unguarded, and the recognition of it arrived with a flash of panic. Blasphemy, he thought—not as accusation, but as instinct, the word rising automatically to seal the feeling away. He drew back inwardly, ashamed less of the thought itself than of how naturally it had formed. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever known—gentle, sincere, luminous in a faith untouched by discipline—and for one unsteady moment his vows thinned. He wondered, with a clarity that frightened him, whether he too had been sent—not to teach, but to remain; not to save her soul, but to share a life she had been denied.

Just at that moment, a presence startled the Holy Man. He turned to see one of the village elders standing silently behind them. There was no telling how long he had been there listening to Flora’s story. The elder spoke “Flora, it is getting late and our traveler must rest now for he will leave first thing in the morning. Let’s go my dear.” Flora looked up loving at the old man and obliged “Yes Father.” She bid the Holy Man adieu with a kind bow of the head, she kissed her father on the cheek and left for her lavvu. Father then said his piece as council elder “We

appreciate your visit Holy Man. I see you are kind and mean well, but you mustn't fill my daughter's head with the ideas of your god." The Holy Man interrupted "But if Flora died in that valley, then how could she be present to tell her tale to me here? She spoke of an angel and a promise she could not keep. What is her mission?" Father replaced Flora on the opposite side of the fire, replying "Listen to my tale closely Holy Man, for it will not benefit your mission, but may give your mission new purpose." The Holy Man listened eagerly hoping this story would give resolution to his dream so long ago.



The Spirit of Solstice

IV. THE WINTER NIGHT

## V. Winter Solstice

I knelt down beside the bedside of my comatose child. All my hopes and dreams were crumbling in front of me. All I had left was my wife, Celeste. I confided in her the advice I had received from the Chieftain. Celeste questioned “But what do we have to offer? All our belongings were washed away in the flood.” That’s when I hesitantly drew the sack of precious stones and metals from inside my tunic. Mother was infuriated “You’re telling me you’ve had this the entire time? Why didn’t you trade this back to the Norse for something useful?” I opened the sack and gazed upon the dazzling treasure. “Because think of how everyone in the village will envy our treasure when we bring it back to the village.”

Celeste then gave me a scolding I have not had since my own mother “You fool! Back to the village? There won’t be any back to the village. We don’t have the means necessary to survive the winter. Look at your daughter! The poor child is already weak from starvation, and you keep your treasure tucked away to yourself. You are not worthy of the title Father, nor Husband, nevermind Council of Elders!” It was these words that hit me like a spear through the heart.

At some point during my post, greed and self-righteousness had overcome my initial virtuous intent to provide for the village. I had failed as a tradesman, a husband, and most of all a father. Celeste gathered the last of our meager belongings and stocked them into the cauldron. She stood over me with her hand outstretched, demanding the sack of jewels. She dropped the sack to the bottom of the cauldron and instructed me “You know what you must do.”

I began my long climb up the mountain. In summer it was difficult, but in winter, with snow up to my waist and the weight of the cauldron dragging behind me, it was nearly impossible. I was starving, exhausted, and uncertain whether I would even survive the ascent, let alone return.

When I reached the pine grove, the snow thinned enough for me to make better time. That's when I saw them, enormous footprints leading toward the peak. Each print was twice as wide and three times as long as mine. The Norsemen had spoken of a Spirit of the Mountain....but those prints belonged to something far larger. The prints ended at the mouth of a cave. I dared not enter; I had no torch, and no courage left to face something that large in the darkness. So I called out into the cave, my voice echoing back to me. No answer.

Kneeling at the entrance, I offered the Spirit our story: our ruined crops, the game that vanished, the early frost that took our last hope of survival. I begged for mercy and guidance. Then I opened the cauldron. When I lifted the sack of jewels, I hesitated. What if there were no Spirit at all? Throwing away so much value in our condition felt like madness. But then I pictured my little girl; her laughter, her warmth, her joy before the famine hollowed her eyes. With that vision in mind, I threw the jewels deep into the cave, turned my back, and vowed to save my family even if the Spirit would not.

A storm chased me all the way back down the mountain. By the time I reached our meadow, the lavvu was nearly buried. I burrowed my way through the tunnel to the entrance. My wife met me, fear already in her eyes. I had no good news to give her. Our daughter was barely breathing. That night, while I watched her tiny chest rise and fall in shallow breaths, something

inside me broke. I crawled outside to sob in the darkness, ashamed that I had failed them. Then I heard bells; soft at first, then unmistakable.

Two reindeer burst from the treeline... then four... then more. A full herd harnessed to a sled. Upon it sat a massive figure, cloaked in white fur with a hood hiding his face. When he stepped off the sled, towering over me, I trembled in my snow tunnel. "Are you man or spirit?" I asked. He didn't answer my question, only asked if I had brought the offering. When I told him I had, he handed back our cauldron and instructed me to have Celeste ready with boiling water upon our return.

When I returned, crawling back through the tunnel, I found the Spirit back upon his sled. He handed me a drinking horn, much like the Norse had ceremonially drank from that night they occupied the lavvu. "Drink," he said. The taste was foul; sour, bitter, and sharp enough to make my throat tighten. I forced it down, my stomach turning, my eyes watering against the cold. He told me to take more, and I did, swallowing until my body protested and my hands trembled. He then held out his hand and pulled me aboard his sled.

What followed was a night unlike any I could have imagined. At first, nothing happened. Then the cold shifted. It didn't disappear, but it no longer felt hostile. The wind still cut across my face, yet I noticed it more than suffered it. Its direction, its weight, the way it pressed against my clothing and then passed on. My breathing deepened without effort. I realized I was no longer shivering. The sled lurched forward, and the reindeer broke into a gallop. We moved faster than I thought possible, but instead of panic, I felt an odd steadiness settle over me. The frozen river beneath the runners was a translucent crystal. The reindeer bolted down the frozen river with such speed that it felt as though we were flying. The river eventually opened to a large

lake, revealing the midnight sky. The sky above us shimmered; stars sharp as needles, aurora ribbons spiraling in violet and emerald.

Moments stretched longer than they should have, yet passed quickly all the same. I could not have said how long we traveled, only that each second felt full. With the endless darkness of night, I found myself hard-pressed to know whether we had traveled for minutes or days. My thoughts slowed and thinned, no longer tumbling over one another. Hunger, fear, exhaustion, all the things that had consumed me for weeks, quieted to a distant hum.

Upon the opposite shore of the lake, we reached a forest. The Spirit finally broke his silence, explaining that I would hunt an elk, an enormous bull, and that I must be patient. He told me that the Amanita would guide me, and only when the time was right would I know what to do.

In the forest, the luminous moonlight reflected off the snow, guiding our steps. Shadows lay clean and precise at the base of each tree. I noticed how sound carried, the soft compression of snow underfoot, the brush of my fur pant legs, and the faint creek of frozen wood far off in the dark. Walking felt effortless. I was aware of my body in a way I had not been before, how my weight shifted from heel to toe, how balance corrected itself without thought. My mind no longer argued with my movements. It simply followed.

The Spirit led the way with the intention of a destination. When we reached a mighty oak tree, he stopped. He handed me back the spear I had left as an offering and silently motioned for me to climb the tree. Up the oak I climbed, and there I waited. I saw visions. I did not just see snow, but the texture of each individual snowflake. The reflection of the moonlight off the drifts and valleys created a tessellating orbital pattern of lights, colors, and shadows swirling about. The gnarled bark of the mighty oak tree expanded and contracted as if it were inhaling and

exhaling. A snowy owl landed on an adjacent limb. From its perch it peered through me as though measuring my spirit. When he completed his analysis he took flight, and suddenly, the elk appeared, giants of muscle and antlers.

The elk easily made their way against the chest-high snow, leaving a wake behind them. I allowed the first to pass. When the second bull came into range, instinct overtook me. I leapt, spear raised overhead, and drove it down with all the strength I had left. The elk fell, and I landed safely in its trail. The Spirit rejoiced, letting out a shrieking war cry. He tossed a dagger down so I could disembowel the beast.

As the dagger entered its abdomen, I felt the spirit of the animal rise from its body, in the steam through the frigid temperatures of the night. The spirit did not mind, as it knew its purpose was to move on so our family could survive. Such an enormous animal would be impossible to carry whole, back to the sled.

I heard a wolf howl off in the near distance as I hurried to butcher the elk. The scent of the carcass had caught the attention of a pack of grey wolves. I passed a hindquarter to the Spirit who traded it for the remainder of the drinking horn. He advised me to finish its contents and warned that if I feared death, my family would surely die instead.

He hurried back to the sled with the elk leg. It was not long before the wolves arrived, six of them, snarling and ravenous. Time slowed. My pulse steadied. I killed three wolves—one with a toss of my spear, two with a stab of my dagger, before one ambushed me from behind. As its claws tore into my scalp, I thought only of my wife and child dying alone in the dark. Lying on my back with the wolf standing over me I reached through the snow to find my weapon. My only option was to fight the animal off by hand. Then the moon was eclipsed by a massive shape. The

Spirit soared over me and tore through the wolves in a terrible, graceful fury. When the snow settled, the remaining wolves slaughtered, his white furs stained a deep red. “We must hurry,” he said. “The wolves are not the only hunters here.”

We returned to only a sled with as much elk as we could carry, not a reindeer in sight. For a moment I panicked. I begged the Spirit “Where are the reindeer? How will we ever travel such a great distance home without a team to pull the sled?” The Spirit calmly reminded me “I had to release my pets, for if the wolf had caught their scent while harnessed they would have been an easy slaughter.” Then he whistled his melody, produced two large red-capped mushrooms from his furs, and soon the reindeer returned, eager for their treats. Then we raced home beneath the most magical sky I will ever see.

During the journey he revealed his name, Klaus, and explained that he was no spirit but a man of the Norse. The Norse believe one cannot rule over another until they truly know themselves. Each year, they train a Ranger to live in solitude and observe nature, then award them exile. He told me about his findings. How the Amanita mushroom, though toxic to man, safely consumed by reindeer, and the “elixir” harvested from their urine. He described the enlightenment of the elixir's effects, “The curse of thought often burdens us, unlike other creatures who live purely by instinct, embracing the moment without hesitation, like your dog Musti. For us, memories of the past can fester, and dreams of the future can pull us away from the life we have today. While our power to remember and dream defines us, it also creates an emotional weight—the lingering horrors we have faced and the pain we have caused. To find true healing, we must learn to quiet the mind's constant cycle. That is why my warriors visit on the full moon. If for a fleeting, vital moment, they must forget the past, release the future, and embrace the present. By doing so, they do not ponder over where they've been, nor fret where

they are to go, but know exactly where they stand. This liberation of the spirit allows them to return to their lives renewed, finding genuine peace and the ability to live fully in the now.”

When we reached the meadow, tears froze on my cheeks. I had brought salvation home. I crawled through the tunnel to find Celeste inside tending to our daughter. Witnessing his blood-soaked clothes, she exclaimed “Father, are you hurt?” My honest answer is, “No my dear. I have never felt more alive.” Without warning, through the opening in the lavvu’s roof, Klaus dropped from the sky carrying a leg of elk. Snapping the elk bone over his knee and dropped it into the boiling cauldron. He explained that the marrow would bring life back into her more effectively, for she did not have the strength to chew and swallow any flesh. I knelt over Flora, praying for her recovery. When I turned, Klaus was gone.

I chased him into the snow and begged for more elixir, so that Flora could recover. For the elixir had given me such strength. He refused with great compassion. “Children live fully in the present, free from fear, boredom, and the weight of memory or expectation. Their sense of wonder comes from experiencing the world fresh, unburdened by pain, routine, or the desire for possessions. They see the magic in the world as you saw tonight. As we age, fear, suffering, and habit slowly dull that spirit, not time itself. Love and nurture preserve this inner vitality, both in children and in those who care for them. To remain truly alive, we must protect and pass on that childlike wonder. The elixir is only for those whose spirits have been weathered by life, not those whose spirits burn brightly.”

Then he reached into his coat and pulled out a sack, offering me back the jewels. I declined and informed him that the only treasure I needed was already inside the lavvu. Then Klaus gave me his final instructions "When the sun makes its return and the weather breaks to the springtime you will leave your lavvu. Make your replacement aware they need not stay. No

Sami need know the perils your family suffered. You fought as a brave warrior tonight and have proven you are sincere of your aspirations. You must promise this.....you will take my reindeer back with you to your village. Protect them and allow the herd to graze in peace. Provide them with their mushroom treats, and they will never stray far. Harvest the elixir and store whatever you can. Most importantly, allow only your immediate family to know the secret of how the elixir is obtained. Pass it down from generation to generation. For if everyone knows its secret, the power of the elixir will be abused. My tenure as Ranger of these woods is over. It is time for me to return home. I will have my fellow Norsemen travel north by ship to trade with you in your village. As long as you have elixir for them, they will provide you with good fortune." With a slap of the reins, Klaus disappeared into the trees. Standing alone outside the lavvu, I recognized the silence of the night and came to a realization. The Amanita elixir had not given me strength. It had taken something away; the noise.

The night after Klaus disappeared into the trees, the wind fell silent. No wolves howled. No branches cracked. Even the river beneath its skin of ice seemed to hold its breath.

Inside the lavvu, the fire burned low and steady, casting a soft amber glow over the furs that lined the walls. Flora lay wrapped in layers beside the hearth, her breaths shallow but steady now, each one a fragile promise. I sat beside her and did not move.

For months I had chased something beyond this valley—status among the elders, admiration from the Norse, proof that I was more than a fisherman and farmer. I had climbed mountains seeking spirits. I had bartered for jewels. I had measured myself against warriors and imagined the envy of men.

But in that quiet, none of it mattered. The winter had taken everything from me—my crops, my pride, my illusions of grandeur. It had stripped the meadow bare, frozen the river, silenced the birds. And in doing so, it had stripped me bare as well.

There was nowhere left to go. The snow outside was waist-deep and the darkness nearly endless. Ambition had no footing here. Conquest had no soil to grow in. Even the North Star seemed less a destination than a witness.

Winter, I began to understand, was not a punishment. It was a narrowing. A drawing inward.

The world had grown too large in my mind. I had tried to stretch my reach beyond what was needed. But winter reduces a man to what is essential. Fire. Shelter. Family. Nothing more.

I placed another log on the embers and adjusted Flora's blankets. Astrid watched me, weary but no longer fearful. We spoke little. There was no need for grand declarations. The quiet itself felt like forgiveness.

Day after day, I remained beside my daughter. When the bone broth cooled, I warmed it. When her lips cracked, I melted snow. When she stirred in fevered sleep, I held her hand.

I did not speak of councils. I did not speak of trade. I did not speak of the village. I let those ambitions fall away like leaves in autumn.

There was only this moment. The fire crackling. The slow rise and fall of her chest. The sound of Astrid's breath across the room.

The darkness outside ceased to feel hostile. It felt protective—like a great cloak wrapped around our small world, forcing us to remain close, to remain still.

The longest night came and passed. I did not notice it at first. The shift was subtle, almost imperceptible. But one morning, as I stepped outside to gather snow, the horizon held a faint silver line for a few heartbeats longer than the day before.

The sun was returning. It did not burst forth in triumph. It crept. The way Flora's strength returned. Drop by drop. Breath by breath.

As the days stretched a little wider, color returned to her cheeks. She began to speak again—softly at first. Then she smiled. The first time she laughed, the sound echoed against the frozen meadow like spring itself had whispered into winter's ear.

I realized then that the solstice was never about the longest night. It was about what survives it.

Winter had forced me to sit in the dark long enough to see clearly. All my striving, all my grasping, had been noise. The elixir had quieted my thoughts for a night—but winter had quieted my ambition entirely.

When the sun began its slow ascent, I did not feel triumphant. I felt grateful.

The world had not ended in darkness. It had simply paused, reminding us that life is sustained not by gold or status, but by tending to the flame nearest to you.

Flora stepped outside beside me the day the sun finally lingered above the treeline for more than a passing glance. She squeezed my hand.

“Father,” she said, “it feels warmer.” It was not much warmer. The snow still covered the meadow. The river was still bound in ice. But hope had shifted direction. The sun was climbing.

And for the first time since I had taken the post, I had no desire to climb anywhere at all. Winter had given me my family back. And that was enough.

My daughter lived. Slowly, drop by drop, the bone broth gave strength back to her limbs and light back to her eyes. When spring came and the new tradesman arrived, he refused to believe a word of our story, until the reindeer appeared at my whistle. Upon return to the village my story brought skepticism and ridicule. Later, when the Norse ship sailed into our harbor for the first time, the entire village fell silent in wonder. From that day forward, we Sami became reindeer herders, and I was no longer an outcast, but an elder.

Now, Holy Man heed my words “Your angel instructed you to be guided by the North Star, though you only followed its path. The North Star embodies true north, revealing not a destination, but a measure of where one stands in the world. It does not chase the night’s sky; it holds its ground. When you know where you stand, your values, your purpose, you create stillness inside motion. You do not stop the world from turning, but you find your place within it. And from that clarity, every step forward knows its way.” Father then held a Norse drinking horn up high and presented it to the Holy Man.

The Holy Man hesitated. He was aware of the fire behind him, the closeness of the space, the unfamiliar quiet now that the drums had stopped. The air felt heavy, as though he had stayed too long in a place not meant for him. He wondered, with sudden unease, whether this was what Gabriel had sent him to face—not repentance or conversion, but participation.

The thought alarmed him. He had come to change them, not to be changed. The realization that he could remain here, that nothing was preventing it except his own resolve, unsettled him more than resistance ever had. Blasphemy, he thought, the word rising automatically, not argued with. He steadied himself by reciting the first commandment under his breath: I am the LORD your God; you shall have no strange gods before me.

The elder regarded him for a moment, then nodded. "I wish you luck on your mission," he said. "But I encourage you to live the life you have now, for today and not a legacy of tomorrow. Try to disregard the midnight sun. Sleep well, Holy Man. In the morning, you will be on your way."

The Holy man rolled over towards the fire and attempted to sleep. He tossed and turned, his mind racing and confused about what to do next. He had been certain he was destined to convert these heathens. The questions continued to fill the Holy Man's mind. He eventually fell asleep for a short time, only to be woken by the men of the tribe.

The Holy Man left the morning after the summer solstice. The sun had not set. It circled the sky in a tireless arc, hovering above the horizon as though unwilling to abandon the North. There had been no night in which to sleep, only a thinning of light that never fully yielded to darkness.

The Sami men stood in a quiet line as he prepared his satchel. They did not crowd him, nor did they speak at length. Their watch was not hostile, but deliberate. They would see him safely beyond the hills before turning back toward their sea.

The Holy Man adjusted the strap across his chest and lifted his staff. The silver crucifix caught the endless light and flashed once before dulling again.

He had come chasing a star. He left beneath a sun that refused to disappear.

For a moment he glanced upward, searching for Stella Polaris, but the heavens revealed no such guide. In this land of the midnight sun, even the stars were hidden.

He told himself that Rome would understand. That the mission had not failed, merely paused. That seeds had been planted in pagan soil and would bloom in time. He did not look toward Flora's lavvu.

The Sami walked with him in silence over the first ridge. From that height, the village appeared small — a scattering of hides against green hills and silver sea. Smoke rose straight into the sky. There was no wind.

At the crest of the second hill, the eldest among them stopped. "Our waters are behind you now," the elder said evenly. "Travel safely, Holy Man." There was no blessing exchanged. No argument renewed. Only acknowledgment.

The Holy Man inclined his head and turned south. The land changed slowly at first. The air lost its bite. The grasses grew thicker. The sea receded behind him.

Each day the sun dipped lower in its arc. Each day a thin band of shadow lingered longer along the earth. Each day he traveled farther from true north.

At first, he welcomed the return of darkness. Night brought familiarity. Night brought stars. Night brought the comfort of a sky he understood. But when Stella Polaris finally revealed herself once more above the horizon, she no longer stood fixed above him. She hovered behind him.

He felt it then — not as fear, but as absence. With every mile south, the darkness lengthened its claim upon the sky. The stars sharpened. The constellations shifted. The nights cooled and deepened. And with each gathering dusk, something within him unsettled.

He rehearsed his sermons as he walked. He spoke aloud passages of scripture, steadying his thoughts with doctrine. He reminded himself of Gabriel's command. Of Rome's authority. Of the promise of eternal life.

Yet the elder's words returned unbidden: True north is not a place but a point of view.

He dismissed them. He tightened his grip on the staff. He reminded himself that salvation lies beyond this world — not buried in bone broth and winter fires. Still, in the quiet between footsteps, doubt pressed softly against him.

Each night as darkness thickened, he wondered why the memory of endless light unsettled him more than comforted him.

Each morning, when the sun rose from behind rather than before him, he felt the faintest pull — as though something remained unfinished in the land he had left.

But he was a man of vows. A man invested in heaven. A man too far committed to turn and question whether he had mistaken stillness for heresy.

So he walked. Southward. Every day the darkness gained upon him. Every day the light of the North faded. Every day his faith grew more rigid in defense of something he dared not examine.

And though he would never confess it — not to Rome, not to the bishops, not even to himself — he carried with him a quiet and unspoken fear: That he had stood at the center of something sacred...And walked away from it.

For though men may walk away from the light, the solstice waits each year to remind them where true north has always been.



## VI. Solstice Stolen

## VI. Solstice Stolen

With the Sami settled as far north as the European continent would allow, the Holy Man had no choice but to turn south, away from the North Star. Each step carried him farther from the certainty that had guided him here, and deeper into doubt.

Now, walking south beneath a sky that no longer held his guiding star, the old questions returned with renewed urgency. Had the bishop been right? Had the angel been nothing more than a dream born of exhaustion? If his mission had not been to convert the Sami, then what had he been sent north to find? And why, of all people, had Brother Nicholas been the one to approve his journey?

The Holy Man sought the Archbishop. Whispers had followed Nicholas for years, tales of a devotion to wine so indulgent it had cost him favor at the Lateran, of a quiet demotion disguised as a missionary post in the northern lowlands. Now Nicholas presided over the young diocese of Utrecht, and it was there that the Holy Man arrived, seeking both shelter and answers as winter stretched its endless night across the land.

A newly raised cathedral loomed from the frost, its windows glowing with candlelight, a beacon to the weary traveler. Inside, the nave stood empty. The Holy Man approached the altar, bowed before the cross, and passed through a rear door into the clergy house. The place buzzed with life, peasants laundering robes, scrubbing floors, preparing a feast rich enough to banish the cold. He stopped one servant and asked, "Where may I find the chaplain of this diocese?"

The servant scarcely paused, pointing toward a great armchair set before the hearth. From behind its tall back protruded only a single arm, heavy and pale, gripping a chalice brimming

with red wine. The Holy Man approached, seeking permission to remain the night. At his greeting, the man in the chair startled, sloshing wine across his robes. “Who in the? what in the? Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!” he slurred. “Francis? Is that you? When did you get so old?”

Drool traced his beard as he squinted up in disbelief. The two men locked eyes. Francis searched his memory, and recognition stirred. Snow-white hair and beard concealed much of the man’s face; what remained was flushed not with health, but with drink. He was thick with years and excess. Francis imagined him shorn of weight and drink, cleansed of time. “Nicholas?” he ventured. Nicholas attempted to rise and promptly collapsed into Francis’s arms. They embraced, though Francis could scarcely encircle his rotund brother. Francis pressed him at once for answers, but Nicholas waved them away.

By the fire, Nicholas spoke instead of his successes and struggles. “The parish grows,” he said, gesturing with his cup, “but the peasants cling stubbornly to their heathen ways. No gift nor threat will turn their elders.” He paused, then smirked. “Though I must admit—some of their customs are not entirely without merit.” He nodded toward the great yule log blazing in the hearth. “They burn it on the longest night of the year, feast without end, and drink grog until the log is ash. I’ve refined the practice, of course. Showing the nobility the delicacy of the grape. Now we all enjoy the proper amenities.”

He ordered a servant to bring Francis wine. Though he despised his arch nemesis, Francis could not abandon his good Christian values and obliged his host. Soon the two clergy drank deeply, uncorking the finest Roman vintages the church possessed. Stories flowed; of roads traveled, cities seen, and souls claimed. Nicholas boasted freely, swallowing glass after glass,

recounting rewards bestowed by grateful nobles. Francis, less seasoned in drink, grew intoxicated more quickly, and with each cup his envy sharpened into bitterness.

Infuriated, intoxicated, envious, at last he burst out, “God—why hast Thou forsaken me? Sending me to the ends of the earth to wander without guidance! Surely I have crossed seas and mountains like Moses himself, only to return with nothing but the tale of a dying child!”

Nicholas raised a hand. “Enough, brother. Tell me this story.”

In the dim glow of the rectory, as the yule log crackled and the chalices emptied, Francis told the whole tale. He spoke of the Sami lands and of young Flora, frozen near death in the wilderness. He spoke of shamans, flying reindeer, and the sacred mushrooms that opened doors between the human world and the spirits. He spoke of her return to life beneath the solstice sun—life given back when all hope had gone cold. And above all, he spoke of Flora’s faith: that the spirit who saved her had done so with purpose, so that her story might live on through those who came after her. Nicholas listened in thoughtful silence, the firelight reflecting in his eyes. By the time Francis finished, Nicholas was no longer hearing a pagan tale—he was already imagining a legend the Church could teach.

When Francis finished, Nicholas sat silent, staring into the fire. At last Francis asked, “Why did you approve my mission north?” Without breaking his gaze, Nicholas answered, “Because I stole your sermon at the abbey. The farther you traveled from that truth, the easier I slept.” Francis flared, but Nicholas rose, suddenly towering. “I am the Archbishop of Utrecht,” he thundered. “You are nothing but a missionary with a failed mission. At dawn you will return to the British Isles or be cast from the clergy.”

Francis departed Utrecht at first light. He did not argue the order. Obedience had shaped the whole of his life, and obedience would see it through to its end. With the winter frost still clinging to the fields, he turned westward once more, bound for the British Isles.

There he lived the remainder of his years as the Church expected of him—faithful, disciplined, tireless in his duty. He preached the Gospel to villages and market towns, baptized the children of peasants, buried the old beneath gray stone crosses, and repeated the same sacred promises he had spoken a thousand times before.

To those who heard him, Francis was a devout servant of God. Yet something within him had changed. In quiet moments, when the chapel candles burned low and the congregation had gone home, his thoughts drifted north—to the Sami fires, to the rhythm of their drums, and to the strange drinking horn the elder had once offered him across the fire.

He wondered, more often with each passing year, what life might have been had he accepted it. The question came to him most in winter, when the nights stretched long and the sky turned cold and clear. On those nights he would look upward, searching for the North Star, remembering the old man's words:

The star does not chase the sky. It simply holds its place.

Time, however, chased Francis relentlessly. The vigor of youth faded from his bones. His sermons grew shorter, his travels fewer. The fire that had once driven him across seas and mountains softened into something quieter—still faithful, but no longer certain.

And so the years passed, until at last Francis lay upon his deathbed, surrounded by the faint scent of incense and the murmurs of attending clergy. It was there he received the news.

A visiting bishop spoke it plainly, believing it would comfort the old missionary. “Your brother Nicholas of Utrecht has been canonized,” the man said gently. “Saint Nicholas, they call him now. His efforts converted the pagan peoples of the Lowlands. The Church celebrates his great devotion.”

Francis closed his eyes. Of course he had. Nicholas had always known how to win an audience. After a long silence, the bishop continued, smiling as though recounting a charming legend.

“They say the children loved him most of all. Nicholas had a habit, you see. On the longest night of winter he would leave gifts outside the homes of pagan families.”

Francis opened his eyes again. “Gifts?” he whispered. The bishop nodded. “For the boys he left small wooden swords, that they might grow into brave Christian men one day—soldiers of the Church when they grew old enough for the crusades.” The bishop chuckled warmly. “And for the girls, dolls and swaddled infants. Little reminders of the sacred duty of motherhood. In time, their children would be raised in the faith.”

The old man’s voice softened. “Soon the children began watching the winter sky for him.” Francis said nothing. “Their eyes shone with wonder,” the bishop continued. “Parents began telling stories so the children would behave through the long dark months. They said the holy man traveled the winter night delivering gifts to good little catholic children. And from there the legend grew.”

Outside the chamber window, snow drifted silently to the earth. “Over the years Nicholas’s parish swelled,” the bishop said. “The tale spread far beyond the Lowlands, carried across the Holy Roman Empire and reshaped by many tongues.”

He began counting them on his fingers. “In France they call him Père Noël. In England, Father Christmas. In Italy, Babbo Natale. In the German lands, Kris Kringle. The bishop paused, pleased with the growing list. And now, in where Nicholas first told the story to the children...” He smiled. “They call him Santa Claus.”