

Solstice

There was only black within blackness when he set out. No moon to light his way, no torch's flickering flames to show where he trod. It was, as it should be, as it always had been, the sacred journey begun in the darkest part of the night. This time fear clutched at his heart when he looked up. The tiny sparks that could decorate the sky, on this night, were lost behind a thicker shroud of cloud. An omen of evil? A shudder rippled down his spine at the sudden thought.

He sensed others nearby, through the slight breeze of movement or the feel of warmth quickly passing by. Nothing human broke the silence, no panting breath nor stifled cough; no word nor heavy step. Only the soft rustle of bare twigs and the swish of flattened grasses revealed they did not travel alone. A sudden snarl, the shake of his spear echoed by others, a deeper growl, and the sound of skittering paws retreating. The danger defeated this time, though the sour smell of fear remained.

He kept going, pushing onward, the scent of fresh crushed herbs and plants swirling around him. His hand, held out before him in the darkness, rubbed against the rough bark of trees. A stone, turned sharp edge upward, sliced into his bare foot, added the tang of blood to the night's scent.

He emerged from the copse, paused at the hill's crest while anticipation mingled with unease. Not far now. He limped onward down the slope towards the flat plain below. All along the hillside many others, familiar and strangers, began the same descent, funnelling downward.

The outer ring of giant stones, cool to the touch, guided him onward into the heart of the sacred. He stopped, waiting, until all rustling of arrival ceased. Shoulder to shoulder they stood, no more movement, no more sounds only frozen stillness. A tiny prickling sensation trickled in repeated waves down his neck to his heels, it was the touch of relief after fear that dissipated, along with the clouds, at the first lightening of the horizon.

A hum, felt through the ground not heard, grew steadily from simply sensed to words as old as time.

"Earth Mother hear us. Sun Father hear us.

Draw back the dark, send down the life-giving light.

Wrap our Mother Earth in your warmth that she can bring forth the deer, the aurochs, the boar, the fish, the plants and grains, that feed and clothe your people."

Louder and louder the chant repeated, feet stamped out a drumbeat rhythm until at last, Father Sun, in all his glory, leapt above the horizon, welcomed by a great screaming shout of joy.

"Winter dark is gone; life is renewed for another season."

Flint sparks were struck, caught on oil-soaked tinder. Fires soon reflected the sun's early morning fierceness and the feasting could begin.