

Dec, 2020



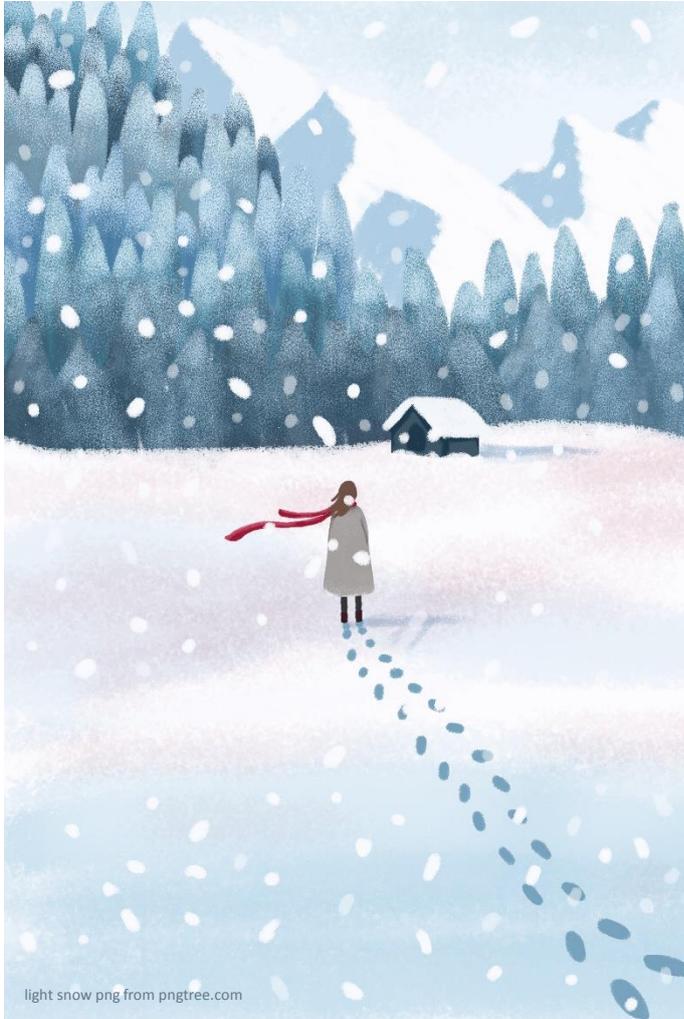
MIDWINTER SOLSTICE

The shortest day of the year is marked at the Midwinter Solstice, also known as Yule. It falls on or about December 21.

The myth of the battle between the Holly King and the Oak King occurs at the Winter Solstice and again at the Summer Solstice. The Yule battle is won by the Oak King, who then rules as the days increase in length and the Wheel of the Year turns toward the summer. In the summer the Holly King wins.

or so the legend says...

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BROM'S LONGEST NIGHT

Chapter 1

Brom peered through the frosted pane as the morning yawned awake. He watched the dawn creep over the lawn, stretching down to the frozen lake. "Midwinter solstice" thought Brom, rubbing his eyes in his sleepy face. It was to be another Christmas away in yet another unfamiliar place. A converted barn, with bags of charm, was the setting for this yuletide but taking flight to a secluded site wouldn't escape *the day Tilda died*.

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It was four years ago today, she was snatched from her parents and brother and the shock of her sudden loss proved too much for them to recover. So each year since they had found a retreat, found somewhere to be alone. Somewhere that could be 'anywhere' just as long as it wasn't at home. Brom was eight when his sister passed and now he had reached her age. He wondered what Tilda would make of him if she'd met him at this stage. She called him "Brom, the dreamer," because he told stories incessantly. "I'd love to be in your head," she'd say, "the magical places you must see!". But that was then and this was now, his sister's loss had hit Brom hard. Little point living in a fantasy world when life had dealt the cruellest card. Putting on a thick jumper and slippers, he made his way along the hall. "Good morning, Brom," sighed his mum, "I was just about to give you a call. The kettle's on, I'll make us some tea, Dad's popped out to chop some wood. Then we can get the stove burning," she said, "the warmth will do us good." Brom studied his mum's face, it was as if someone had turned off her light. "It may be the shortest day," he thought, "but it'll be my mum's longest night." Dad came in with a basket full of logs and parked his old wellies by the door. He went over to mum and gave her a peck, "A cup of char will help me thaw." Brom's dad had been the strong one, he was determined to play that role but he carried his sadness on his shoulders, Tilda's loss had taken its toll. They eat their breakfast in silence, each one was lost in private thought. Revisiting personal memories of all of the happiness Tilda had brought. "I thought we'd light a candle tonight." said mum as she rose from her chair. "And we can look at some photos of Tilly," dad said, "Before we say a prayer. That would be nice, wouldn't it, son, it might feel like your sister's here?" "Sounds great." Brom said with a smile, quickly turning to hide a tear. The day rolled by, mum baked some pie and dad made a yule decoration. "Hey, Brom," he hollered, "put your boots on, it's time for some recreation!"

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"I'm already toggled up," Brom replied, "but I was planning to go on my own. I hope you don't mind, but if that's alright, I'd really like some time alone."

Brom's dad understood and said to his boy, "Of course, son, it's *your* call. Just don't wander off too far in the woods, make sure you're back by nightfall."

Brom zipped up his coat and pulled on his hat to combat the wintry breeze. Rucksack on back, he took the stone track that led to the forest of trees. The gravel crunched under his boots and Brom's breath frosted in mid-air. He entered the wood, stopped and stood, savouring the scents everywhere. The aroma of pine evoked Christmastime, as did damp moss, lichen and leaf, along with a carpet of fungi and flora, spiced with earthy rich notes beneath. Bracken and ferns edged the path with green fronds and fiddleheads of fawn. There were clusters of berries dotted all around; juniper, holly, blackthorn...

Brom pressed on and the woodland thickened, as light gave way to shade. Maybe it was time for him to turnaround, but then Brom noticed a glade. It was quite faraway and off the track but Brom's curiosity had been spiked. "Probably not right, definitely not bright," but adventure was what Brom liked! He set off through the brambles and bushes, a maze of tree trunks in his way and he finally made it to the clearing just as sunlight gave way to grey. As he entered the space Brom spotted a fox, it stared back without any fear. A crafty smile across its face seemed to say, "You're most welcome here!"

The glade was framed by a circle of trees of identical shape and height and in the centre a magnificent oak which was draped in celestial light. Brom was transfixed by the oak tree, it was ancient and gnarled and wide. He walked over and gazed at it in wonder; its base had a chamber inside. Guarded below by huge knotted roots, the entrance had a soft white glow. It was an effect being created from above by several clusters of mistletoe. As Brom moved closer to the great tree he spotted a plaque on the bark. He used the torch on his phone to read it in the gathering dark.

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It told the tale of the 'Solstice Oak' and the strange powers it had on this day.
It could transport a mortal being to a land, beyond where reality lay.
To get there though involved a task, an arcane ritual to carry out.
Brom decided he would do this without the slightest shadow of doubt.
He grabbed a branch of mistletoe, and clambered inside the mighty oak.
Following the drill, Brom proceeded to kneel, then the incantation he spoke:
"Pòg na Beatha, leig mi troimhe," then, "Pòg na Beatha, bheir mi dhut."
As his words trailed off the old tree groaned and the chamber entrance shut.
Inside the chamber, change was afoot, accompanied by a splintering sound.
A staircase assembled beneath Brom's feet, spiralling deep into the ground.
Brom started the descent, step by step, he held on tightly to the hand rail.
Round and round in circles Brom went, just as his torchlight began to fail.
Plunged into black, but refusing to look back, Brom kept going further down.
There was water dripping, his feet kept slipping and the tree echoed all around.
Much further below Brom saw some light which was something to focus upon.
There was no turning back, Brom knew that, and any thoughts of this long gone.
The nearer he got so the temperature dropped and ice was forming all around.
Brom peered below and was sure it was snow that covered the looming ground.
The staircase widened as it came to an end, Brom stared ahead at the scene.
It was a glistening winter wonderland finished off with a sparkling sheen.
As he panned around to take in this view, Brom suddenly received a shock.
A man with a hood, and a beard of stars, sat watching him on a frozen rock!

Chapter 2 ...

Thanks for reading Chapter 1 of 'Brom's Longest Night' – if you would like to read the entire verse novella, please send me a DM on twitter with your email address and I will forward it to you!

Best wishes, Simon (@Dwarven_King_SH)