

Rites of Midinváerne Vol. I

The Winter Solstice Celebration in Lyria and Rivia After the Nilfgaardian Invasion and the Notorious Victory by the Northern Realms

The day has finally come. Everyone is eager to celebrate the Winter Solstice or as the elves call it, the Midinváerne. The city dawned merrily on the crisp blue sky, chimneys of all sizes and forms cast cottonlike clouds in the morningtide, echoes of little children ringing teeny bells, as they go down the streets calling their sleepyhead friends; this is truly a extraordinary day.

Sausageries, bakeries, wineries exhibit their most appetizing products: the large pigs, with their leather clearly shaved, suspended from the ceiling with their heads down; the blood sausages and other delicacies dangling with refinement; the heads of veal, surrounded by watercress; the fat turkeys as bellies of priests, stuffed by secret but undoubtedly delicious concoctions; finely ornamented kegs of wine from Touissant, home-brewed liqueurs, simple ciders, giant barrels of Mahakam ale; and if it was enough, rows of pinewood tables surrounded the streets with marbled gelatines; crunchy fried partridges stacked like pieces of art; pork chops with minced parsley; thick opulent sauces of asparagus and for the sweet tooth, jellies of golden reflections; gingerbreads; the multitude of cakes: dry fruits, chocolate, all sort of pies, puddings, figurative cookies and of course, the special midwinter cake. And the profusion of these expositions gives the aspect of abundance, of plenitude.

The bouquets of violets, lillies, roses and orchids, extend from all sides to the houses balconies, and perfume the ambience with a dewy freshness. The baskets of camellias sparkle like large enamels. The jewelery stores set up the great celebrating tree, whose stems bloom in almond shells, in golden cartons, in animals of all sorts, wooden horses, and in beautiful linen dolls dressed in colorful satins holding tokens of good health, love and prosperity. Entire Lyria walks in the vast joy of the sun. The men bring their parcels, the women carry their children by the hand. The girls, dressed again, in their most fine garments, fresh as lilacs, with their rosy noses by the northeast wind, flock to the city square for a ball organized by the most distinguishle members of society, in favor of charity. The musical instruments, in thundering joy, calls the gang of young ladies and the luckie lads. The big tree in the center embraces with grace the lovely gifts.

What contentment! What a joy! What peace of soul! What innocence! How kind! Everything in the cities of Lyria and Rivia danced in fashionable ways, everything laughed, everything sang in this delightful festival for all ages, all professions, all kingdoms and races, of all time! There was no place for hatred and rancour. The elves, dwarves and gnomes sing their songs of old; nilfgaardian deserters enchanted by the northern magic, dance with Lyrian maidens and make life-changing vows; a rare couple of friendly trolls, fed by sugary and fragrant cakes, lay covered with bows and ribbons, captives of a spirited children battalion; Skellige travelers toast their brothers and sisters who found a home in the continent; many characters in diverse exotic clothes, playing tambourines; the reapers with their sickle and bundle of wheat; the loggers carrying the sacred stump to the bonfire; the shepherds with a lamb under the arm; beggars and strays chanting and sharing the wealth like there was no tommorow; numerous flocks, turkeys, ducks, pigs and kids.

In each home, the night arrived, and with her, the daughters-in-law, the sons-in-law, the grandchildren. The table was added with a big towel, the cutlery, the glasses, the old gold bottles. They lit a thousand lights in the silver candlesticks. Everyone in new clothes, came and went with the rhymes of dishes, counting cutlery, breaking the bread, putting the fruit, uncorking the bottles. Those who had arrived from afar that same night gave hugs, received kisses, asked for news, told stories, accidents of the trip; and they talked about the hail, the snow, the cold of the night, rubbing their hands with satisfaction for being warm, comforted, in anticipation of a good supper, sitting on the old couch of the family. And the northeast whistled through the slats of the windows; in the distance some stream of water roared and the oak groaned, while in the kitchen, where the great fire burned, the smell of warm wine boiled with honey and cinnamon, arrived in a hearty breath. Finally the stewed fish and meat had come out.

A voice said, "*To the table!*" To the table! There was the dragging of the chairs, the clinking of glasses and cutlery, the unfolding of the napkins, the steaming of the terrine. The broth was taken, the first glass of wine drunk, shoulder-to-shoulder, hand-to-hand. What the hell! To demand more would be to ask for much. All that is deepest in the heart of man, love, faith, country, family, was all there gathered together in a sweet peace, not opulent but laughably remediated and satisfied. No, that's all? It is not. There was this feeling of imperfection in the air. An old lady who for us only represented a grandmother, a daughter, a sister, a wife, a mother...The tears were like the evocation of the spirit of the absent and the spirit of the dead for that banquet. The party was then interrupted by serious, thoughtful silences, during which each one of them would withdraw into himself and look a little at the past and at some future. Of those who had sat at that table on that same night, how many had left to return no more! How many gaps within the last few years! In a few more years, how many more! If there was, as almost always happens, a son, a grandson, an absent brother, it was around his memory that they clustered together and fixed those vague cares dispersed. The grief of the past, the uncertainty of the future, would appear to each one under the adventurous figure of the intrepid traveler, soldier and many others who celebrated that night in a far kingdom or in the waters of the sea. And this absent loved one was the company that each one felt closer, to this table, close to his heart. It was only we, the children, who enjoyed this uninterrupted and perfect joy at this feast, because we did not have the bitter understanding of longing or the uncertain concerns of the future. For us everything in life had the immutable and eternal character. Destiny appeared to us ridiculously fixed; surrounded by love, songs, feasts, gifts, full of caresses and kisses, we had a day to be a martyr, a hero or a God.

No, life is not a permanent and immobile party, it is a constant and rude evolution. The *Midinværne* is the feast of tears for all those for whom it is not the feast of inexperience. And yet, some thought that it was useful not to fail to celebrate it. What does it matter that the number or the name of the guests varies each year? What does it matter that some old loved ones miss the feast? What does it matter that we ourselves fail for the coming year at the feast of the younger ones? This night of joy for the children will always be of some nostalgia for the adults. Thus we will have the tender hope of surviving for some time in the memory of those we loved for a good time at least once every year.

And the celebration culminated in the reunion of all children and families, well-groomed and fuelled, positioned in the highest points of the city, beneath the cool jeweled moon, with the eyes wandering the skies, waiting for a glimpse of the ever-elusive Wild Hunt.

Now leave me be, let me get some rest, untill the time comes for the next year!