

# STUORRA-JOUNI

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The frosty snow sounded like starch under Aslak's reindeer-leather boots as he strode towards the goahti tent of Stuorra-Jouni, the shaman. There were men standing around Jouni's large abode already, even though the bitter cold air made them shiver and the wind swept down the fjells like a pack of wolves. Above the little Sami village, Arctic lights danced and flirted with the stars.

Aslak reached the man nearest to the door of the goahti and turned him around by the shoulder. "Well? Is he walking the Gorge?"

Vulle the One-Eared, Jouni's apprentice, looked at Aslak. "No... he's still drumming, can't you hear? And half an hour ago, he demanded more dried mushrooms. It's never taken him this long to descend into the Gorge. I wonder what's wrong."

Aslak acknowledged the other elders and looked at the goahti. Through the worn leather tent, he could see Stuorra-Jouni stepping around the fire, banging his drum. "DUM-dum-dum-dum-DUM-dum-dum-dum..." was simple and hypnotic rhythm, to which the shaman sang his wailing joiku in a tired voice. Vulle started towards the door of the goahti, but Aslak held him back.

"Let's leave him to it. He's mightier than any other shaman around here, he's not called Stuorra by accident. He will find a way into the Gorge," Aslak said. As if to underscore his words, a mighty bang of the drum was heard, and the form of Stuorra was seen to fall to the ground. "Now! Go see to it he doesn't writhe into the fire!" Vulle entered the tent and closed the flap.

Aslak turned to the elders. "Well, what do you think? Can we survive the onslaught of the wolverines without Stuorra's magic, or is it vital he gets to talk to the spirits of the beasts?" Aslak asked. The elders looked around for signs of opinions on each others' faces, and then Mihkkal, the oldest of the group, spoke.

"No. So far the wolverines have killed fifty-five pregnant cows and dozens of first year calves. It's still only late February. Our herds will be decimated before the winter ends, and that will be the end of our tribe too. It's up to Stuorra now – we cannot guard the herd in the woods." Mihkkal shook his head.

"Damn... I sure hope he still has his magic. I mean, he did get the wolves to move east when they gave us trouble last. It's a good thing he came back already from his last trek south. I don't like it when the shaman is not with the tribe." Aslak glanced at the fireworks in the sky.

"And don't forget, it was his shaman skills that provided us with the murderer of old Nilla! We'd still be wondering if he didn't walk the Gorge and meet Nilla in the netherworld, and hear who stabbed him!" said Limping Alvar.

“Yes, yes. He’ll soon be back from the Gorge and tell us what he has found out. Let’s go to my goahti, it’s too cold to stand around here. Vulle will come and tell us when Jouni returns.” Aslak led the procession of elders to his tent and offered them creature comforts by the warm fire.

Some time later their low-voice chat was interrupted by Vulle’s appearance. “He’s back from the Gorge!” he gasped, but he was shoved aside from the goahti doorway by Stuurra-Jouni himself. Naked from the waist up, sweat steaming off his back into the freezing night, the old shaman entered the tent wild-eyed.

“I’ve descended into the Gorge, and returned. I met the spirit of the bear, and paid him my respects, but he wouldn’t talk to me. I saw the spirit of the wolf, and he allowed me to approach him, but he wouldn’t tell me anything. I went looking for the spirit of the wolverine, but he was nowhere to be found. So, I turned to Ukko the Supreme God and prayed for a long time in the shadows of the gorge, with the spirits of the dead walking past me.”

The elders all shivered when they thought of what the shaman had gone through once again. Aslak ventured to ask: “Did Ukko let you approach him?” A venerable shaman like Stuurra-Jouni might come back and claim contact with Ukko.

Stuurra-Jouni turned his face to Aslak, his pupils like charcoals in a ring of white.

“No.”

Aslak was surprised. “No? You didn’t get any word from Ukko? Or the bear, or the wolf? Who did you talk to then?”

Stuurra turned to face the fire. “I met the spirit of the arctic fox, and he spoke with me.”

Aslak let fly a scornful laughter, and regretted it straight away – one does not laugh at the shaman who walks among the dead. But then, he decided to push the issue. “It’s wolverines we have here in great packs. We’ve never seen them in such numbers, and have never lost so many reindeer to them, and all you do is converse with the spirit of the fox! A mighty shaman we have!” The elders accompanied him with chuckles, but soon they fell silent.

Stuurra-Jouni took a sip of water from a leather water bag with his hand, then turned to Aslak. “How many times have you walked the Gorge, Aslak? How many? A thousand? A hundred? Three... or none? I still remember when you were thigh-high and already you had a big mouth, and I was a shaman by then. Now, with this wolverine onslaught at hand, you choose to ridicule me, your shaman, and yet I am the only one who can even try to do something! My apprentice, Vulle here, has tried to enter the realm of the earth for a year now, and he’s not even been near the Gorge yet. And you, Aslak, make the elders laugh at me, like I was nothing but a worn-out water bag!”

Aslak said, “I wish no quarrel with you, Jouni, you know that, and we all know you’re our only hope. But you must come back with better results, or our tribe will perish.”

“You didn’t ask what the spirit of the fox said,” Jouni muttered, and took some more water.

The elders watched intently as Aslak asked, "And what did the spirit of the fox say?"

"Our tribe has gone greedy. There's too much reindeer now, and Ukko has given the task of culling the herds to the wolverine. That's why I couldn't find the wolverine's spirit – he was leading the attack. And that's why the bear and the wolf wouldn't talk to me, they're high beasts too, and will not meddle in Ukko's business." Jouni scanned the faces of the elders in the light of the fire, and saw anguish.

"So... we must convince the gods and spirits that we are not greedy by sacrifice. I suggest we round up half the silver and half the gold in the tribe and offer it to the gods."

The elders began a mumbling conversation. Jouni let it go on for a while, then said, "You can discuss all you want, but that's the way out."

Andaras, the largest of the elders, took the lead. "Why should we waste our gold, when there's a sure-fire way to satisfy the gods and spirits? Is Jouni afraid to take that option?"

Jouni turned to face Andaras. "I bet you're referring to what Sammol the Thumbless did behind the Ailigas fjells, when the bears attacked their village and took human lives?"

Andaras pushed his thumbs under his knife belt and said, "Damn right. Sammol was not afraid to sacrifice well, and behold, all was well right after he offered the maiden and the youth to Ukko and the spirit of the bear. Why should we lose our gold and silver, if it is not enough? We should go for the biggest value straight away, I say."

Jouni turned his back to Andaras. "That's easy for you to say. You have no wife, no children, and only an aged mother that would not do as an offer. Instead, you have more gold and silver in that casket of yours than all of the others combined. We have heard that silver clinking when you let it flow from your hands into the casket, and seen you drink from that golden goblet." Andaras looked about him and saw many elders agreed with Jouni.

Aslak said, "I understand we must do all in our power, and if human sacrifice worked with Sammol, it may work with Jouni too. That is, if you're a shaman worthy of Sammol."

Jouni spun around like a spindle. "Let there be no doubt that I, Stuurra-Jouni, am indeed an equal of Sammol! I've seen his spirit in the Gorge now that he's dead, and he has given me his blessing. So be it! If it is sacrifice you want, that is what you get. I want everyone to carry half his silver and gold to me, and then, I want Aslak's youngest daughter Milka and Jussa's youngest son Nihkke to be delivered to me too – for the demanded sacrifice."

Aslak tried to argue further, but Jouni silenced him with an icy stare. "And... I want your best bull, and three of Andaras's best cows. Nothing less will suffice. The whole loot must be in my hands by first light. If not... my magic will fail, and all will have been in vain. So the future of your precious reindeer herds and this tribe lies fully with you now." Signalling to Vulle, Jouni left, and the elders scrambled out of the goahti into the biting cold.

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The first faint and almost colourless light of the day revealed much hustle and bustle at the goahti of the old shaman, where three sleds with their reindeer were lined out. Crying

women caused a commotion as they accompanied Nihkke and Milka from their respective family goahtis. Nihkke was consoling his mother who clung to him, tearing at his arms and trying to stop him from going, and arriving from an opposite direction, Milka led an equally distraught procession of women. But the youngsters had resigned to their fate, and took their seats in the third sled.

Andaras then brought out three slender but well-fed reindeer cows, and tied them to the third sled. Aslak had already brought his finest bull, and patted it with an absentminded expression on his weathered face. Men of the tribe brought their gold and silver in little bags, and Vulle piled everything in a casket bound to the sled. Some tried to hide a bit of their wealth in their satchels, but Vulle forced them to open up and drop everything in the casket.

Overseeing the entire process was Stuurra-Jouni. He had dressed up in his finest clothes, of colourful blue, red and yellow cloth, and a wolfskin coat. Many golden ornaments were stuck to his jacket, and he had a necklace of wrought silver. He had slung his biggest shaman drum across his back. Vulle had been ordered to prepare his biggest sled for the occasion.

Jouni seemed to grow in stature as he walked to the line of sleds. "We're off. Soon, there'll be no more wolverines. Bid farewell to your people, Milka and Nihkke – you are saving them from a terrible calamity. As for you who remain behind – think of what is really important in your life, and repent your greedy ways!" And he snapped his reins and headed east, into the rising sun, followed by the two other sleds.

They rode all day, stopping for short breaks as needed by the reindeer. By nightfall they had covered some 30 kilometres, and Milka and Nihkke expected them to stop for the night. But Jouni drove on, into the ice-covered forests, illuminated by a quarter moon. With the snow reflecting the light it was feasible, but the youngsters feared for their lives with the wild speed.

After midnight, Jouni led the party up a fjell. The reindeer struggled to keep the sled moving among the trees, but after a while they reached the barren side of the fjell. Jouni stopped and got off the sled. "This is as far as we go now. Help me gather firewood."

Milka and Nihkke thought this would be the end of their lives and asked Jouni how they would be sacrificed. Jouni looked at them astonished. "Look, I asked you to collect firewood so we can get warm for a while. We need lots of it too. Nobody is going to get killed right now but we will freeze soon." The youngsters exchanged a curious look, and went to the task.

Jouni himself went down the fjell with an axe and felled three trees, slashed the branches off, and then hauled them up with his reindeer. Nihkke and Milka worked hard on their firewood, and collected a sizable pile, but when Jouni saw it, he ordered them to get twice as much more. He started collecting firewood himself.

When at last he was satisfied with the collected wood, it was a sizable pile indeed. Milka and Nihkke did not dare to ask what would happen now, but their anxiety shone in their faces in the pale moonlight, so Jouni told them what would happen.

"As soon as you are rested, and have eaten some, I want you two to take the reindeer and the sleds, and ride east. After a few hours, you will see where the sun rises. Ride towards it, then let it be on your right all day. Ride east as many days as it takes to get to the White Sea,

then turn north. You will find my old tribe there, and they will help you. My sled is filled with food and tools for you.”

The youngsters did not comprehend what he said. “But surely you brought us out here to Little Ailigas to offer us to Ukko? Will you not sacrifice us on this holy mountain?”

Jouni took out his massive Lappish knife and began to prepare the meal by slicing meat off a frozen reindeer leg. “What good would that do? You’re better off alive. Get a cooking fire going so we can eat – I’m famished.” Nihkke started a fire, and Milka helped Jouni with the preparations.

An hour later they had steaming reindeer stew in their wooden cups, and Jouni thought the time was ripe to explain. “The times are changing. What happens now is a sign of how the times will change. You remember I went on a trek south a couple of months ago, like I always do? And Vulle was the shaman in charge for that time, even if he’s not more than an apprentice?” The youngsters nodded.

“I went south to the village where they have goahtis made out of wood, and they look like nothing we have, but they are square boxes painted red. I only wanted to buy a new knife, but then I heard Magga the Mighty was living just outside the village now. You will not remember Magga, but he used to be the shaman of the shamans. When any of us had a problem, we’d go to Magga, and he’d enter the Gorge just like this –“ Jouni snapped his fingers “ – and be back just as soon with all the information.” Nihkke and Milka looked at him wide-eyed; villagers rarely heard any inside stories of shamans.

“I found his goahti, but I should have understood he was in a bad way already from the look of the tent. Nevertheless, I went in to greet him. He was skunk drunk and I had trouble waking him up, but he didn’t even recognize me at first. I took away his bottle and forced him to come to his senses, because I had to hear what had happened to him.” Jouni spat into the fire in disgust.

“There’s a new god coming from the south, he said. When people moved into the painted wooden goahtis, they forsook the old ways of the shaman, and began to shun him, because the men who carry the new god told them to. The new god is more powerful than the old ones, they say, and they have meetings once a week where the new god is present.”

Milka asked, “But... no one ever sees Ukko the Supreme God except when he’s angry and throws his hammer around in the clouds and there’s thunder and lightning – how can this new god be seen?”

Jouni squinted his eyes and said, “He can’t be seen either, but the worst thing is this: Anyone can go to him and pray to him directly, and once a week, the new god allows people to eat his flesh and drink his blood – not for real but through bread and wine. This, Magga told me, opens a channel directly to the god, and people can ask him for help.”

The youngsters were horrified.

“So... Magga said this to me: if he was the only one who could go and walk the Gorge, and discuss with the spirits, he stood no chance against a god that allows himself to be eaten by anyone, weekly, and will help people without a shaman in between. People stopped asking

him for guidance and turned to the shamans of the new god. That's why he'd taken to the bottle, to drown his sorrows and hope to descend to the Gorge for good, and fade away from the Earth."

Jouni threw another piece of wood into the fire and watched the cinders dance up into the dark sky.

"And that's why we're here. I was just waiting for something big to happen so I could start this operation. I am not going to go Magga's way and drink myself to death. I have different plans. You're a part of the plan. Back at the village, Vulle is such a weak apprentice, he'd never have learned any real shaman skills, and now, with the new god reaching our tribe within a year or two, he will fall before him."

"But why did you take us if you will not sacrifice us?"

"Because I saw you look at each other when I presided over the wedding of Anni and Einar, and because I want to punish your parents for their greed. You will start a family of your own with the White Sea tribes. As long as you never come back to tell what happened, this will work out all right. You have the tools and a goahti in my sled, and these reindeer will get you started with your own herd. Just tell everyone I presided over your wedding before you left. I'll give you some gold and silver too just to tide you over."

Stuorra-Jouni stood up. "It's time for you to go. The Sun will rise in about three hours. Connect the sleds and off you go." Jouni unloaded the casket of gold and silver from the sled, and took out two satchels, then gave these to the youngsters.

Milka and Nihkke thanked him for saving their lives and bid their farewells, and took off downhill with the reindeer. As soon as they were beyond Jouni's sight, he went to work. First he constructed an A-frame of the trees he'd cut. This frame he positioned beside the pyre they'd amassed, and set it to lean over the pyre, suspended near the vertical by a rope. He set fire to the pyre and began beating his drum. The steady beat comforted him for what was to come.

When the fire was at its peak, its red and yellow flames consuming the dried age-old Lappish pine, and the heat of the fire making him sweat, Jouni opened the casket of wealth, and began to throw the gold and the silver into the fire, a handful at a time. His hoarse joiku song echoed in the valley and was responded to by wolves far away. Last, he picked the golden ornaments from his jacket and let the fire eat them one by one, and the very last item he flung into the pyre was his massive silver shaman necklace. He picked up the drum again.

Stuorra-Jouni ended the drumming and singing when he felt himself transformed into a form that could descend to the Gorge in the centre of the earth. He stripped his upper body naked and ignored the north wind that tore at his flesh. Armed with his knife, he climbed to the top of the A-frame and stared at the pyre that would consume his mortal form.

With his eyes on the fire, he cut the rope.

At the village, people were awakened by an inhuman howl that echoed in the fjells around them. Fearful, they arose from their goahtis and turned their eyes to the east. Some later said it was just Arctic lights; others said Arctic lights don't show distinct spots of red, like a

fire does when new firewood is thrown in and the embers are disturbed. All they knew for sure was, this was a shaman at work, and they prayed his work would bear fruit.

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Today, if you go to Lapland to pan for gold, the locals will say that there's a special creek you might want to try. Some say that it's not only gold you will see in the gravel and sand on the bottom of the creek that runs down the side of Little Ailigas. There are prospectors that have found silver as well, which hasn't happened anywhere else in Lapland, and these nuggets were not irregular in shape like gold nuggets are.

These nuggets of silver were in the shape of tears.