



# *Talvi and the Stars*

E. C. Hibbs

Mythology

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*5 min read*

Thousands of years ago, in the far north of Arctic Scandinavia, there was nothing but snow and trees. The stars shone down on frozen lakes and white hills, but they were lonely in the dark sky, and longed for a friend, who could come up from the earth and shine with them. So they sparkled brighter than ever, looking, watching, and waiting.

Suns rose and set over the same old forest, and the moon's face waxed and waned in the same old sky, through season after season. One dark midwinter, thick clouds swept in and encased the forest like a blanket. Snowflakes began to drift down, weaving invisible paths in the frigid air. All the animals scurried for shelter – white grouse retreated to the safety of their nests, and reindeer huddled so close that their antlers smacked together.

There was a sudden splash of red as a fox hurried through the trees, a lemming clutched in her jaws. As the snow became heavier, she squeezed into a hole under the ground, where her three brothers were waiting in the den beyond.

She laid the lemming down, and her brothers tucked in. As she chewed, she glanced up and let her eyes settle on the far corner of the den. A meek face stared back at her.

Growling with frustration, she tore a leg off the lemming and tossed it over.

“Here you are, Talvi. Don’t expect any more.”

Talvi’s ears drooped. He was the youngest of the four, as well as the smallest. Either of those things would have been enough for his siblings to hate him, But unlike them, who all boasted beautiful red coats, his was as white as the snow. It made his eyes look darker; his teeth smaller. It was all wrong, and he knew it as much as they did.

“What are you grimacing at?” snapped his sister suddenly.

Talvi jumped. “N-nothing.”

“Are you turning your nose up at that?” she pressed. “Ungrateful runt. You don’t deserve that lemming. You don’t deserve this den!”

She peeled her lips back to show her fearsome set of teeth. For a moment, Talvi thought she was going to attack him. But instead, she snatched him by the scruff of his neck and dragged him up the burrow entrance. Then she flung him out into the cold night.

He lay in the snow for a moment, stunned.

“What are you doing?”

“You’re not like us. I’m tired of pretending that you are. So go away,” she replied with a sneer.

Talvi’s heart leapt.

“No, please don’t send me out alone! You’re all I have! I won’t survive on my own!”

“Go!” snapped his brother. “We never want to see you again!”

They really meant it. They were casting him out.

His sister lunged. Talvi leapt away, feeling teeth snapping at his ankles. Fright seized him and he fled into the forest, snow flying up behind him.

He didn't dare to look back until he was sure the den was out of sight. No, they hadn't followed him. He wasn't sure whether that made him feel relieved or even more afraid.

Before long, his trembles of fear turned to shivers. The night was bitterly cold. The clouds had been scattered by a wind too high for him to feel, and now there was nothing overhead to hold in the heat. A frosty ring formed around the moon. Alongside it, the Milky Way stretched through the sky, like a river of stars flowing around the world. They seemed to look down upon him, alone in the darkness.

Talvi dragged himself around the side of a tree so he would have some shelter. Then he lay down, curling himself into the tightest ball he could manage, and closed his eyes.

Despite everything that had just happened, he fell quickly into a fitful sleep. His pointed nose twitched and he kicked out as ice settled in his fur, stretching its long thin fingers down to his skin.

He saw himself back in the den, as it had been for as long as he could remember. He was in his corner, where he stayed so much that even when he was outside, none of the others would go into it. It was his space, kept empty not out of respect, but dislike. It was the coldest part of the burrow, closest to the surface, and sometimes frost formed on the walls. In the freezing nights, he would lie there alone, pushed away from his siblings' warm huddle, and listen as they spoke about him in whispers.

"He looks so strange."

"Nobody will ever see him against the snow, he will never stand out."

Talvi had kept his eyes closed and tried not to pay attention. But deep down, in his heart, he knew they were right.

What he wouldn't have given to be back there now. A freezing corner was better than no corner at all. Any family, no matter how hateful, was better than loneliness.

Then, in his dream, he saw his bushy tail shimmering with an ethereal light. It jumped from green to pink to

bright purple, flowing like water. At any other time, he would have found it odd – but this was a dream, and the light felt warm, like the sun in summer.

Comforted by the ghostly heat, he smiled to himself, and dove deeper under the thick surface of slumber.

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The next morning, he woke to a strange snuffling sound. He raised his head, squinting in the early light. The sun was hitting the ground at a clean low angle, making the snow shine pink and the sky seem as blue as lake water. Long shadows leapt from the bases of the trees, and all was clear and still. On a nearby branch, a white bird perched, one wing covering its head.

Talvi eased himself to his feet, stretching out his muscles and shaking the ice from his fur. Then he looked around, searching for the noise which had stirred him.

It wasn't long before he found it. In the distance was a group of brown shapes, and a strong musky smell was on the air. A herd of reindeer.

Talvi had seen reindeer before. They were all over the forest, usually wandering alone in search of food. But every now and then, they would come together. They were using their large hooves like shovels, digging through the snow to find the lichen buried underneath.

Talvi watched them for a few moments before a thought occurred to him. If these animals, which he had often seen alone, had now made themselves a group, would he be able to join them?

He knew it would be odd, a fox among reindeer – but a white fox like him was odd among true foxes. He'd heard that often enough from his sister. And no reindeer could treat him as horribly as his siblings, could they?

Feeling hopeful, he walked nearer, slowly so as not to startle them. His coat lay invisible against the powdery snow.

When he got close enough, he spoke.

“Excuse me,” he said, “I’m all alone, and I wanted to ask, uh... if you could please be my friends?”

The reindeers' eyes shot up.

"Who said that?" said one of them. "Is it a ghost?"

Talvi realised the reindeer couldn't see him – his coat had blended in with the snow too well. So he stood up on his hind legs and shouted, "No, I'm not a ghost! I'm over here!"

"Over where?" cried another reindeer. "I see nothing!"

"It's coming from over here!"

"No, it's over here!"

The reindeer were working themselves into a frenzy. Their nostrils flared as they tried to catch a scent of the hidden creature. Younger ones huddled close to their mothers in alarm.

"Please don't be scared of me!" cried Talvi, but his voice startled them even more. Before he could speak again, the herd bolted, fleeing into the trees.

It wasn't long until the muffled sound of their hooves had vanished, leaving him alone once again in the silent woods.

Talvi dropped back onto all fours. He lowered his head in sadness. So, whether he was seen or unseen, he caused distress and hatred? His sister's words wormed out of his memory, that he wasn't a true fox. It rang true more than ever.

He let angry tears fall, but they froze into tiny icicles on his nose. He brushed at them with his front paw, only for more to flow from his eyes. In the end, he gave up, and slumped down in the snow.

The short winter day melted away into night. First a directionless blue twilight bathed the forest, and then the stars came out to look down once more upon the world. Talvi hadn't moved. He lay with his legs tucked under him, eyes closed miserably.

“Maybe I should just stay here,” he said to himself. “Nobody can see me anyway. I’ll let the snow fall on top of me, and then I can stay here forever.”

“Please don’t do that, little fox,” said a voice.

Talvi leapt to his feet and looked around. The forest was as quiet as ever.

Then he caught the slightest of movements on a nearby branch. It was a tiny bird, its entire body covered in feathers as white as his own fur. And it seemed to be shining from within, as though it had swallowed a piece of the sun. It hurt Talvi’s eyes to look at directly, so he turned his head a little to the side.

“Who are you?” he asked, half-expecting the bird to make fun of him too.

“I’ve been watching you, little fox,” it replied. “I have seen how you haven’t a friend in the world, and so have my brothers and sisters. So I’ve flown down to tell you that you do have friends, in us. If you would like that.”

Talvi flattened his ears.

“Why would you want to be my friends? How do I know you won’t laugh at me, or run away?”

“Because I tell you we won’t. Do you hear me laughing? See me leaving?”

“No. Why?”

The bird bobbed its head. “Because we have been just as lonely as you, up in the sky.”

Talvi frowned at those last words, but every moment he looked at the bird chased his confusion away. Its feathers were so soft, as though they were made of snowflakes, and twinkled with each small movement. He had never seen anything like it before.

“Do you mean it?” he asked tentatively. “You’ll be my friend?”

“We will all be your friends.” said the bird. “But you look so cold from your wanderings out here in the snow. So, I know the perfect way to get you warm in time to meet my family! Come fly with me!”

Talvi lowered his head. "I can't fly."

"Try," the bird urged. "You never know if you can do anything until you try."

"I'm not a bird."

"Neither am I."

Talvi frowned. "What?"

The bird didn't wait for an answer. It spread its sparkling wings and circled off the branch, and headed towards the sky. Talvi stared after it, wondering if he had misheard it. Then he shrugged – what did he have to lose?

He bent his legs and leapt, his massive tail sweeping up a cloud of snow as he jumped. But he didn't fall. With an excited yelp, he looked down at the ground below, seeing his shadow hovering over his last set of footprints.

"Follow me!" called the bird.

He didn't waste a moment and ran as fast as he could, feet pedalling through the air as though it was water. Every kick rose him higher into the air. Snow-laden branches passed by, then tapered away when he appeared above the treetops. He caught up with the bird, and happiness spread through him as they soared side-by-side. Overhead, the sky was alive, the stars shining like diamonds: a thousand little birds waiting for them.

Then, on a whim, Talvi looked back, and gasped with wonder.

The snow cloud he had kicked up was following them, spiralling from the ground and spreading out into the night sky. But it was no longer white. It had begun to change colour, bleeding into greens, pinks and purples, until it lit the forest below like a strange inverted fire. Trails sprung out like branches, melting into others, swirling in every direction. All around Talvi, the dancing light and starry birds wove together, until he was floating in the ethereal abyss.

The bird smiled at Talvi.

"You see, this is why you were so different to your red-coated siblings," it said. "Because only you are special

and bright enough to create the Northern Lights, and be friends with the stars forever.”

And so it is that on winter nights, when the same old forest is cold and the same old sky is clear, a once-lonely white fox awakens and sweeps the snow with his tail. Lights dance, and stars sparkle. Thousands of years on, he comes up from the earth, and shines with them.

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