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CURSE OF A DARK GOD

By John Brown

AUTHOR'S NOTE (08/14/2009):

I'm providing this portion of draft 2 to readers interested in seeing how things are progressing. Yes, this is an early draft--warts and all. I'm sure it's got typos and other errors and may change dramatically as we move through the versions. If you have comments or suggestions, please contact me.

The chapter headings will change. Colored names and day headings are only here to help as I work on this copy. I will be taking them out later and then formatting chapters as I did in book one, e.g. "Chapter 1 Lust."

Enjoy!

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Day 1

1. **Talen Lust**

At first Talen thought it was a simple matter of lust come into full bloom. Every time Talen took a girl's hand, an edgy and reckless longing would run along his skin and down to the core of his gut. He'd been to dances before, but he'd never felt the likes of this. It was almost a hunger. It made him bold. Too bold--for his heart was longing to do something his mind told him would probably lead to fists.

More than two hundred folk from surrounding farms and villages had gathered at the Uncle Argoth's for the autumn apple dance. Part of the attraction was Uncle Argoth's tiled patio which was large enough for thirty couples to dance upon. But the free hogsheads of cider had their power as well. They'd drawn at least one bunch of Vargon quarrymen from ten miles away.

The Swan's dance ended and the lute strummer called out the Mill dance. It got its name from the way the dancers moved like the vanes of a wind mill. Talen knew the steps well. Furthermore, the sun was setting, which meant this was probably one of the last dances of the

evening for which you could choose a partner, one of the last opportunities to dance with Chandra. He'd wanted to dance with her the whole evening. He supposed every male with eyes in his head had wanted to dance with her. But, by the Six, while they dreamed, he would actually do it. He was going to have her in his arms out on that floor.

Talen put down his mug of cider. He stood on the sides by a table laden with meat pies. Ke, his bull of a brother, shooed a few flies away and picked up another pie, a small thing no bigger than a plum. Talen had tried one of them earlier. They were nasty little wads of leek with a few miserly sand grains of unidentifiable meat hiding in the corners. He suspected the family of rat catchers from Lind had brought those.

Ke plopped the whole thing in his mouth, chewed, and let out a sigh of satisfaction. Then he picked up another.

Talen shook his head--there was no accounting for taste.

Ke's hair was cropped short. He wore a rust cloak. The gash on his face from the battle he and Talen had been in down in the bowels of an ancient warren had healed, but a scar remained. And having taken out the stitching only just a few days previous, the stitching holes were still visible. It made him look like some brutish pin cushion. But he had danced as much as Talen had. Some ladies fancied a man who had been damaged a bit. Of course, his brother's size and form didn't hurt his prospects either. But there were advantages to having a more slight build, as Talen did. Speed was one. And now that he was learning to use his powers to multiply his abilities, he could muster quite a bit of speed.

"I'm going to dance with Chandra," Talen announced. "Watch and learn."

Ke raised his eyebrows. "The Chandra that's betrothed?"

“She’s not,” said Talen. “No yet. Not officially.” Talen took another swig of his cider.

This wasn’t hard cider, or he’d be convinced his boldness was all drink.

Ke looked down at Talen. “You’re a brave one to stir that pot of trouble.”

“She’s been making eyes at me since before the hogs were carved.”

“She makes eyes at everyone,” said Ke. “Stay away, brother. They don’t call her the widowmaker for nothing.”

Talen flicked his hand in dismissal. “That’s just mean-spirited gossip from jealous women.”

“And what about the woodcutter from Gesh?”

“What about him?” It was the woodcutter who was said to have struck a deal with Chandra’s father for her betrothal. The wood cutter was larger than Ke with arms thick as hams. And a fighter to boot. Those fists had knocked a number of big men silly. The woodcutter could take a beating as well. He wore his broken nose like a badge of honor. Nevertheless, Talen wasn’t going to be buffaloed. He’d faced down a real monster not a month ago. He could face down a woodcutter. Besides, if it came to it, there was no way that brute could match his speed. Talen could simply run away.

“You’re determined,” said Ke, “aren’t you?”

“I am.”

Ke reached down and picked up a boiled crawfish a good five inches long. He cracked it with his hand and exposed the red tinged flesh inside. He brought it to his lips and fetched out a hunk of the meat. “Then you’d better move,” he said around the meat. He pointed with his chin past the crowd. “I think your competition has let his guard down.”

Talen looked where Ke had pointed and saw the woodcutter walking purposely towards uncle Argoth's four-seater outhouse, affectionately called the Grand Hotel, where the line was a good ten people deep. What was more, Chandra was looking at Talen yet again with that appraising smile and come-hither eyes.

Goh, she was an earthy goddess in a white dress with a scarlet shawl overtop, her long black hair up in a complicated braid so all could see her lovely throat.

"Right," said Talen. He smoothed the front of his wheat-colored tunic then tucked back a stray lock of his long hair behind his ear (which long hair his sister had assured him was an undoubtable woman-catching quality although it had almost got him killed by a bunch of villagers).

"I've got your back," said Ke. Then he picked up his mug, took a drink, and planted himself on the spot, obviously waiting for the entertainment to begin.

Talen ignored him. His black boots were a bit too tight. And he would have preferred to kick them off and go barefoot as he'd done all summer, but he'd spent an hour cleaning and polishing them and they made a good effect. He inhaled through his nostrils then set off, threading his way through a flock of people enjoying mugs of cider, walnut and raisin turnovers, and roasted mushrooms. What remained of the hogs and fowl roasted above half-a-dozen cook fires. The evening breeze wafted the scent of the crackling fat across his path.

Not a month ago, Talen had died. He'd been laid out on the dusty floor of a cave like a doll with all its straw stuffing scattering to the wind. He'd been dead and floating above himself until the monster stuffed him back into his bones and made a request. A request which Talen had fulfilled. And now, having met death once, Talen did not want to go into that peril again loaded down with regrets, if-onlies, should-haves, and small cowardices.

Life was like the setting sun, shining in glory on the cliffs, turning them yellow and orange—the spectacle lasted but a few moments, and if you were too stupid or afraid to seize the moment, it would be gone. And Chandra wasn't something to be missed. Even if she were only in his arms this once.

Old Drash was leading his pet bear away from the house. The creature had entertained them earlier, but had been sorely tempted by the roasting hogs and was getting peevish at having to be satisfied with one joint.

Hogs roasted above more than six cookfires, the smoke wafting across in the breeze. Across from the cook fires, in the shade of three pear trees stood a line of tables upon which sat meat pies, fruit tarts, and cheese rounds. Next to that was the table loaded with the hoggins of free cider.

Out in the fields walked a few grandparents who were there to guard against couples slipping out into the woods. Soth the cheeseman was gesturing and angry, talking to one old man. It appeared Soth's daughter, despite all the precautions, had slipped away.

Talen dodged around a little boy chasing after a dog and, at last, stood in front of Chandra. She gave her two friends a look and then gazed up at him. Those eyes were marvelous and not at all innocent. She looked bemused and calculating, and for a moment he felt like a worm about to put on a hook. She smiled, showing the fact that she still had all her teeth. He wasn't ready for the power of such beauty up close. Nor had he expected the immediate fight he now had on his hands. Chandra's dress was cut so low he found himself having to concentrate on keeping his eyes from roving to places below her chin.

“One of the heroes comes at last,” she said, referring to the group that had fought the monster down in the caves. Of course, only Talen and the others who had been there knew what really happened.

But he wasn't thinking much about that. He wasn't thinking much at all. The way she had said that, the mischeviousness in her eyes, the curl of sweat-damp hair caught in the moisture at the base of her pale throat—it stole nearly all thought from his mind. He suddenly realized he was out of his depth here. He'd been used to frolicking in shallow waters, but this woman swam much farther out in a dark and mysterious sea. Nevertheless, Talen cleared his throat and offered her his arm. “I thought you might be weary of sitting on the sides,” he said. The truth was the woodcutting brute was not much of a dancer and had been out on the floor only once this evening. “I've come to offer you the service of my boots.”

She smiled and he did not know if she was laughing at that last statement or truly pleased. She stood and Talen marveled that the mere rising from one's seat could be accomplished with such beauty and grace.

By the Six, she was going to accept. He'd done it!

He was going to dance with one of the greastest Shoka beauties around. And this under the nose of her bruising almost-betrothed to boot.

Someone poked him in the back. “For shame, will you make on old woman run?”

Talen turned. There was the the old widow Hanesh. She was shriveled as an apple with eyes a bit too far apart that reminded Talen of a goat. A tender and good woman, to be sure, known for her squash pies. His father had looked after her for many years. She smiled at him, unabashed that all her front teeth were gone.

“Did you not hear me call out as you walked by?”

Talen had not. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Now you can make it up to me," she said a bit breathless. "It's the last dance. These legs haven't got many more in them. But I thought, there goes Hogan's son, surely he'll be one to not ignore a woman just because she's old."

"I..." He couldn't say no. That would be supremely rude. But this was the last dance. He looked at Chanda who was watching him with curiosity. Behind her the woodcutter was making his way back, giving Talen the stink eye. He'd obviously decided now was not the time to visit the Grand Hotel.

The musicians played the last call for the dance. "Come on," said the widow, and slipped her arm through his. "I'll remember this for a week."

Talen got a shock, for he felt the same lust run along his skin that he'd felt with the other younger and much more attractive partners he'd danced with this evening. He was in such a shock that he made no protest as the widow tugged him to the dance floor.

Chandra gave him a look that said "too bad" and waved him good-bye with a flutter of her astounding fingers. Then Talen was walking out to the dance floor.

The desire tickled the very core of his being. It wasn't overpowering, not like the glamour of Chandra. But it was there, nevertheless. He looked down at the widow. She gummed a smile. And he longed for her.

Goh, by the Six! He longed for her. He was going to be sick.

2. **Talen** Torch Dance

Talen knew this was impossible. The dance began. He saw Ke off on the side giving him the thumbs up. Talen moved through the steps of the dance with consternation. There were mysteries kept secret by women, passed from woman to woman. There had to be some lore in this, some hex or hithering. It disgusted him that such an old woman would use such a thing. But then, maybe she had used it all along and this was just old habit. Nevertheless, it was unbecoming a woman her age. What did she hope to accomplish by it?

They danced, forming the turning vanes of a wind mill. He smiled as was polite. He kissed her hand as the last step of the dance demanded which only enflamed the desire, then walked over to the cider tables.

Ke had dispatched four more crawfish and now had a rhubarb tart in one hand and a wooden mug of cider in the other.

“Lust,” Talen said with disgust, “is overrated.” He saw there was one eel pie left. He’d had two earlier. These had been cooked with sweet onions and cream all wrapped in a flaky crust. They were delicious. But just looking at it now made him ill.

Ke looked down at him. “What?”

“You can’t trust lust,” Talen said. He raised his hand and shook it vaguely in the direction of the crowd. “Nor can you trust these women.”

“A little bitter that Chandra spurned you? I told you not to stir that pot.”

“She didn’t spurn me. It was the widow. She had something to inflame desire.” As soon as those words came out of his mouth, Talen regretted it.

Ke looked at Talen as if he hadn’t quite heard him correctly.

“It’s not natural,” said Talen. “And don’t look at me like that.”

Ke shook his head. “Brother, you’re a strange little man.”

“No, I’m not what’s strange,” said Talen. Until now he’d thought courtship was a level playing field. Of course, women had their wiles. But he’d put no stock in that before. Tonight had changed his mind. A man, if not careful, was put at the disadvantage—distracted by hemlines and painted eyes, magicked. “That widow, she, well, I—“ Ke waited expectantly and Talen knew if he said one word more Ke would use it to torment and embarrass him for the next three weeks. “Nothing,” said Talen.

“Your head has always clattered a bit, hasn’t it,” Ke suggested. He smiled and shook his head in mock sympathy. “It must be difficult for you.”

Talen gave him a shove in the arm which didn’t move Ke in the slightest.

“I’m just saying I now know why there’s such a caution put on the desires of the flesh.”

“The desires of the flesh?”

“Lust,” Talen said.

“Lust is a good thing,” Ke said. “Natural as rain. But it is not the only thing. I don’t know what you’re talking about with the widow, but let me give you some advice. When it comes to women, you can’t let your heart go all pitter-patter at batting eyes. You have to look for overall quality. Take me. I want someone built for breeding. She’s got to have a wide hip. Ample breasts for milk. Good teeth. And she’s got to be strong enough to carry stuff about. She’s got to be a bidable creature. Which Chandra is not.”

“Well Ke,” said River. “You’ve outdone yourself this time.”

Both Talen and Ke turned to her. Their sister had come up behind them and was looking over the food. She’d hidden the scar around her neck that she’d received in the battle with the monster with a pretty saffron choker. Unlike Ke’s scar, that one would probably not enhance her attractiveness.

“From your criteria,” she said, “it sounds like you’ve decided on a milk cow, not a woman.”

“Ha!” Talen laughed.

“I was thinking,” said Ke, “that drover from Carsh has a daughter that fits my description rather well.”

River smiled. “Of the woman or the cow?”

“Is there a difference?” Ke asked.

River rolled her eyes. “Mark me,” she said to Talen. “You follow his advice and you’ll end up with someone who attracts horseflies more than anything else.”

Ke laughed, and River turned back to the food. “Ah,” she said in delight and picked up the last eel pie. “I’m starving. These dancers haven’t given me a break.” Then she took a bite and murmured her satisfaction.

Uncle Argoth clapped and announced the Torch dance. Talen loved this dance. It was customary to perform it before the Harvest dance, which would be the last dance of the evening. But unlike the Harvest dance which included everyone, the Torch was performed only by the men and boys. And there was something about the rhythm and stomp, the fire. He’d been practicing his part and was ready. And he was desperately wanting something to take his mind off of the old widow.

The drums began to beat, calling the dancers out. Talen shucked his boots and stood in his bare feet. He’d danced this with his brother and Da every year for as long as he could remember. It felt strange not having Da here. His mind flashed back to the horrible scene in the cave and Da’s death. Talen felt a sharp pang of loss. He knew if he looked at Ke, the sorrow would rise, so he focused his mind on the dance.

The lute joined the beating drums then the dance began. The men lined up in back. The boys in front. The men began singing, the basses first, then the tenors joining in. Talen sang. The boys began to dance, first all together, then small groups broke off to perform small feats-kicks, cartwheels, flips.

Talen remembered doing those as a boy and practicing with his father. He began to choke up. No memories, he warned himself. Just sing.

The men began to stomp and clap in rhythm to the tune. The boys did hand walks and flips. Then it was the men’s turn to join in. The first move was to put your arms around the

shoulders of the men on either side, making a line. The line would go forward in a march. Seven paces out then back.

When Talen put his arms around the men on either side of him, he felt again the longing he'd been feeling all evening. His melancholy fled. This just couldn't be happening. They marched out and back. They turned. As with the boys, there were a number of feats the men did, each one more difficult and requiring more strength than the last. The boys picked up torches and weaved between the men. And all the time Talen felt this cursed lust. But it couldn't be lust. Not unless everyone was using some form of the widow's hex.

The music began to beat faster to the crescendo. The singers, the men and boys too old or maimed to do the feats, were clapping and roaring out the three-part tune. The boys were twirling torches, kicking, locking arms and spinning. The feat men set up behind in groups of six. In each group, one man stood in front, two on either side behind, cupping their hands like stirrups. The last three, called jumpers, stood behind, holding torches in their mouths. Talen was among these.

The first jumper simply leap-frogged the front man who had put his hands on his knees. As the first jumpers leapt, the women watching the spectacle shouted out. The drums and music changed. The front man stood tall. The second jumper got the help of the stirrup men, leap-frogging much higher than the first and kicking his legs wide. Again the women shouted.

Talen was the last jumper in his group. The stirrup men heaved him up. But instead of leap-frogging, he rose to stand on the front man's shoulders. He'd practiced this many times to get it right. The singers hit a note and held it. The music followed. At that cue, the front man, who'd had his knees bent just a little, heaved up. Talen heaved as well. He soared, flipped in the air, his arms wide, and landed squarely. Then the two jumpers who had gone before grabbed his

hands and pulled him forward. Talen leapt, landed, then rolled and came up on his knees for the final flourish to correspond with the music and song.

The women applauded with shouts full of gusto. But inside Talen was confused and seething. Every time he'd taken the hand of one of the men or boys, the longing he'd been feeling all night rose in him. It tickled him softly. The worst was when he'd had to hold big old Maven's sweaty and hairy hand for what seemed an eternity, feeling like a chord was being struck in his bones.

This wasn't lust. It couldn't be. There was none of Chandra's glamour in it. He knew what it was to desire someone, and this was different. He stood and took the thin torch from his mouth. People clapped him on the back. A few mothers complimented him. Talen moved through the crowd looking for Ke. He saw him and River chatting with two girls. Talen had met both of the girls before. Neither of them had Ke's cow qualities. As he came closer, he heard the one with the pink ribbon woven through her braids say with entirely too much vivacity, "Ooh, there's your brother."

Ke turned.

"You were a picture of grace," she said to Talen. She touched his arm and it sent a small jolt along his skin.

Yet another deceiver, he thought. "Thank you," said Talen. "But I must steal my siblings for a moment."

"What?" asked Ke, clearly not wanting to move.

River must have seen the concern in Talen's face. "Come on," she pulled at Ke.

"Will you be dancing the Havest dance?" asked the girl with the ribbon.

"I certainly hope to," said Ke as he allowed River to pull him away.

When they were alone, Talen said, "I'm not right."

"You've never been right," said Ke.

Talen ignored the comment. "Even when holding Maven's sweaty hand," said Talen.

"Either everyone's got some charm or I'm going crazy."

River was confused. "What are you talking about?"

"Lust," said Ke. "He fancies the old widow Hanesh."

"I do not fancy her," said Talen. "But there's a desire every time I touch someone." He reached out to River and took her hand. "There. I'm feeling it now. You've got some cursed woman's lore about you, haven't you?"

"Brother," she said. "I'm wearing no such a thing."

"It's like thirst, a hunger," said Talen.

"Do you hear yourself?" said Ke. He took Talen's hand, looked him hard in the eyes.

Talen felt the same pull. "Even you. What is it? What's going on? Maybe the monster didn't put all my pieces back correctly."

It was then that someone screamed in the darkening woods. Many in the crowd turned. Moments later the cheesemaker's daughter broke from the tree line, holding her pale dress so she could run. A boy followed her out of the woods. That was compromising. What a fool. The boy should have been running the other way. He was going to get a beating from her cheesemaker father, her brothers, and all their distant relations. The girl ran straight. The boy stumbled into the grass.

From the woods came a sighing as if the very trees themselves were breathing, exhaling a tremendous breath.

Those who had been moving forward stopped. Talen had never heard the likes. Something tall and dark move away through the trees. Or, at least, Talen thought he'd seen that, but he couldn't tell for sure for nothing moved in the dark wood.

The girl was sobbing. This wasn't some tryst gone awry.

River spoke low so only Ke and Talen could hear. "Get yourselves ready." It was her code for telling them to multiply themselves, to build their Fire.

3. **Talen** Tattoo and Claw

Talen slipped a weave on his finger. He was learning how to increase the rate he consumed his Days, to build his Fire, multiplying his natural strength and speed. But unlike River and Ke, he was still in training. He wore the weave of a dreadman's candidate to control it, but it took time to build your Fire, even with a weave.

“What in the Six--,” a farmer asked behind Talen. “Did you hear that sighing?”

Some of the children on the dance floor twirled around unaware of what had happened.

The girl ran to the cheesemaker. “Da,” she cried in fear, her eyes as big as boiled eggs. The cheesemaker had a club in his hand, facing the woods. He sent his daughter on and began to slowly back away. The boy who had been in the woods ran toward the crowd, his eyes as wide as the girl's.

Above the field the bats flitted in swoops and dives. The roasting fires popped. And from a great distance a keening carried across the tops of the forest. The sound carried and echoed.

The music faltered and then stopped altogether. This time all eyes turned to the woods.

A number of weeks ago a creature of grass and stone had terrorized these regions. It had been the servant of a being with powers Talen could not begin to understand. It had taken the lives of man and beast. It had killed a Divine. Such terrors were not so easily forgotten. The crowd pulled back in on itself.

A mother snapped her finger at her oldest daughter telling her to fetch her brother and get to the house. Then she began to lead her other two children to the kitchen door. Two other mothers followed suit.

Out on the grass the boy shouted. "A giant black thing, there was smoke."

A beat of silence passed and then men and women began to call out to their children. The alarm continued, then Uncle Argoth climbed up on a chair. "Good people," he said. "Good people!" he repeated louder. A few people stopped, but most ignored him. Ke whistled long and loud and the crowd quieted.

"Good people," Uncle Argoth said. "We're going to investigate. Husbands and wives, stay here. Put the small children in the house. It's probably nothing more than shadows and an evening gust of wind. If I were a boy caught dallying in the woods and having to face the cheesemaker, I'd make up stories as well."

Nobody laughed at the joke, but it took the edge of the fear in the crowd.

Argoth began to call out to specific men. Three of the visiting farmers walked back to their mounts and wagons to retrieve axes and swords. Other men joined them. One woman from the crowd bravely ran out to the orchard to drag her two boys out of the trees.

Ke turned to Talen. "You stay here."

“What, are you going to attack whatever’s out there with a meat pie? At least I’ve got a knife.”

Ke snatched the knife out of his hand. His powers had already multiplied, and he moved like snake. “This should do nicely.”

“Give that back,” said Talen.

Uncle Argoth was the captain of a war company of the Shoka clan. All of his men had been invited to this apple dance. Ten of them had come with their families. These with a number of others strode forward, some buckling on their sword belts. All of these were training as well. Talen saw they’d put on their candidate weaves. They were experienced in war. The weaves would only make them more deadly.

Uncle Argoth pointed at four of them. “Guard the visitors and house. Get the men in a perimeter, but don’t alarm anyone. If you need weapons, get Serah to open up my armory.”

The leader of the four immediately turned, put his hand on the shoulder of a farmer, and asked him to find five other men with some weapon and stand at a spot between the roasting pits and the orchard.

“I’m coming,” Gesh the woodcutter said. He held a cudgel in his hand. Uncle Argoth nodded. Ke and River joined the group Uncle Argoth had called. When Talen stepped forward, Uncle Argoth gave him a look.

“You can’t keep me in a cage, Uncle,” said Talen. “Besides,” he pointed at the woodcutter, “I’m quicker than he is.” It was true Talen was still recovering from his death. There was soreness and residual odd pains and once in a while he’d hear whisperings. But he’d rested long enough.

“Speed isn’t the half of it,” said Uncle Argoth, his dark eyes glittering, but he didn't say no. He gave Talen's request a second of thought then came to his decision. “You get Nettle’s bow, and you watch your lines. The last thing I want is an arrow in the back.”

“Yes, Zu,” Talen said and ran back into the house. Talen’s father had been a Koramite master of archers. Maybe Uncle Argoth was right and he wasn’t ready for hand-to-hand combat, but he could shoot. He found Nettle’s bow, all black with charcol and smelling of beeswax. He looped the quiver over his shoulder with a dozen arrows in it. He pulled one out to see if it was a mere practice shaft, but it had a fine point on it. They were hunting arrows with bleed lines running away from the head.

There was no way he was going to push through the crowd that was now coming through the door, so he unshuttered one window and crawled out that way. He ran past the men that were forming up into a perimeter toward Uncle Argoth and the others who had already moved out into the field. Talen caught them just before they entered the trees. They were split into three groups of about six each. Talen joined up with the smallest which had the woodcutter in it. Uncle Argoth had forced the boy who’d been dallying with the cheesemaker’s daughter to go with them and show them what he’d seen. The crickets chirped in the woods around them. A cicada made its racket up a tree to their left.

“Which way?” Uncle Argoth asked the boy.

“In there,” he pointed. “Not fifteen paces in, next to an old birch that’s fallen and half rotted.”

The sun had set and the dusk fading, but with the torches there was still enough light to see. The men stepped into the forest, swords and spears raised. Talen nocked an arrow. He’d have to be careful of branches. A bow wasn’t something that had a long range in the woods. But,

these woods, being close to the house, were not as dense as they would be where they ran wild. thick.

Talen's heart beat in his throat, despite the fact that there were two of Argoth's men in Talen's group. They were burning their Days, quickening their normal physical abilities, multiplying themselves by two and three times. A man who could leap five feet, could now leap twelve to fifteen. A man who could lift two hundred pounds could now lift a calf above his head.

Not all multiplied evenly. Some gained more strength than speed, others more stamina. Talen could multiply himself more than most, four or six times. His ability ran toward speed. He'd raced River, who was lightening fast, and he'd kept up with her. Nobody he knew could do that. On the other hand, he didn't multiply strength well. He wasn't like Ke. Not yet. The saying was "multiply a worm and all you have is a slightly stronger worm." He supposed, to his dismay, that he was an illustration of that.

But he had more than enough strength to draw Nettle's bow. Da had taught him to not only draw with power and economy of motion, but to hit what he aimed at. Of course, in the woods the smallest twig could send your shaft wide.

He and the others moved in, the leaves and braches crunching under foot. The gathering gloom in the woods was deep enough that you couldn't see anything but shadows more than a few dozen feet away. The torches also revealed an odd mist. Anything could come rushing out at them.

They walked in a little farther than fifteen paces, then a man in Talen's group cursed. "G'alls," he said and jumped back. He lowered his spear at something on the ground.

"We've got something," the man next to him yelled out to the other groups.

Talen kept scanning the woods. Now would be the time someone would come out at them. But he too stepped closer and at last looked down at what had been found.

It was a woman, lying on her back, as naked as a fish. Her limbs were akimbo as if she'd been tossed there like a discarded doll. Her hair was black as a raven's. One of the men held his torch close. Her eyes were wide open and yellow with an odd slit instead of a round pupil. Her skin was silvery green.

“Look at those lines,” one of the men said. And indeed her body was swirled and looped with a hundred thin lines. They looped about her mouth, her neck, her chest. The only place where she wasn't touched was about her brow and eyes, but even her eye lids were marked.

Uncle Argoth and the others arrived.

“She's got length,” a man said. “And those teeth.”

She was tall. And where a normal person's canines would be, she had fangs as thick as your thumb. She did not have the delicate feet of a woman. They were hard and scaled half-way up her calf with claws for nails. Her hands were strong, but they too had black claws, not finger nails.

Uncle Argoth took a torch and moved forward to inspect her.

“Careful” a man said, “those claws look like they could rip you wide open.”

“She's dead,” Uncle Argoth said and reached down.

Half the men braced themselves, but then he rolled her to reveal a puncture wound in her back. The ground all about her was covered in dark blood.

“Look at this,” another man said a few paces away. He held his torch down. “It's a print of something large.” He measured it with span of his hand then compared it to the woman's foot. “She wasn't alone here,” he declared. “There's something bigger in these woods.”

“Probably the thing that killed her,” said Ke.

“I think we should go back,” said the woodcutter. “Come out again when it’s light and we can see.”

“I want you to make a search in this area,” said Argoth. “Thirty paces out. Go.”

Not everybody wanted to search, but they went. You didn't say no to Uncle Argoth unless you had good reason.

Talen watched the woods and took a small comfort in the fact that at least he hadn't voiced his fears like the woodcutter. The men searched but didn't find anything else, and it was getting dark. So Uncle Argoth ordered them to take the woman back.

#

Talen stood with Uncle Argoth, River, Ke, and the Creek Widow in the great hall of Rogum's Defense, the fortress where Uncle Argoth and Lord Shim were raising up the Grove. The tattooed woman lay on a table before them. Talen couldn't but notice that she was beautiful. However, by moring the beauty would be gone, replaced by rigor motis and bloating.

“These aren't normal tattoos,” said the Creek Widow. “They're weaves.”

“Some Divine's creature then,” said Uncle Argoth.

“How can you tell?” asked Talen.

“There's one of the Grove who you haven't met,” said the Creek Widow.

“Harnock?” asked Talen. They'd spoken of him before.

“Yes,” she said. “He’s got similar patterns on his skin. You wouldn’t see it because he’s covered in hair, but they’re there. Not as thickly laid as these. But they’re very similar.”

“Does he look like her?” Talen asked.

“No, Harnock’s a different one altogether.”

“But what Divine does it serve?” asked Ke. “And what killed it?”

“One of the old women at the dance called it a wisterwife,” said River. “She said she’d seen one before in the old country.”

“That still doesn’t answer the question,” said the Creek Widow.

“If it is a wisterwife,” said River, “then maybe it was Lumen’s.”

“Or the devourer’s,” said Talen. She had named herself “the Mother” down in the caves. But they’d decided not to call them that. She was no mother of men.

River nodded. “So who would want to kill their servants?”

“Mokad,” said the Creek Widow.

That was a good guess. The devourer had killed two of Mokad’s Divines.

“Bone Faces,” said Ke. “They’ve been raiding for years.”

“Do you think maybe something has come in from the Wilds?” Talen asked.

Uncle Argoth considered this. “Maybe. Whatever the case, I believe our brief lull before the storm has come to an end. I don’t think our enemies are waiting until after winter. They’re here. Our battle is at the doors.”

#

Outside of the great hall, a man clad in black clung to the stone above one the two-story windows of the hall. He was one of those who had been sent to capture a holy one and bring him or her back to the Glory of Mokad. He clung to the wall, head pointing downward like a bat.

He saw a Glory's servant on the table. Heard them discussing what it was. One of these, he suspected, was the one they sought.

High above the man the half moon shone. The tiles of the roof of the hall gleamed in its silver light.

4. **Sugar** Skull Thief

By the light of the half moon, Sugar lifted a charred log as long as a man in her arms and carefully moved it aside. She dared not make a sound as she rooted around in the ash and soot and blackened remains of her family's house in the village of Plum.

She'd slipped by the Fir-Noy guards patrolling the fields around the village easy enough. But the thumping of burned logs and boards at her home would bring them for sure. The growing bit of light over the mountains in the east wouldn't help either. Morning was coming. And if the villagers who lived here spotted her, they'd kill her.

They'd killed her father only a few weeks earlier. Killed her mother, although it had taken her longer to die. They'd set fire to the house and smithy. Burned the whole place to the ground. And into the raging fires they'd tossed the body of her father, their two dogs, the horses, and all her mother's fowls—every living thing.

She'd slipped away early from the festivities at Rogum's Defense, the fortress where she was supposed to be right now, sleeping with her squad members, and traveled the many miles to the village of Plum. She didn't fancy having to work her way back through Fir-Noy territory in broad daylight.

She'd expected the whole vale would still be asleep, having stayed up late with the annual apple dance festivities. But it appeared they hadn't let their guard down, over-vigilant murderers that they were.

She moved another board. She had to find what her mother had had left her. She didn't know what it was, just that it was by the hearth. Those had been almost her very last words as she lay dying miles from here in the cave of the monster. She'd remembered as a little girl her mother having a stone box there.

The ash had gotten all over her. She could feel it on her face and arms and in the sweat down her back. She could feel it all fine and powdery between the toes of her barefeet. It was so soft. The stones of the hearth stood above the rest of the house and shone dully in the moon light. She got down on her hands and knees and began to root through the ash, hoping to feel it whatever .

A dog barked in the distance. She widened her search. If she didn't find it now, someone would notice her footprints in the ash. They'd notice things had been moved. They'd investigate, and the contents of the box would be lost to her forever.

She didn't know exactly what was in the box. She suspected it might have something to do with the lore. Otherwise, why hide it? But she didn't care so much about that. The only thing she had of her mother was a lock of hair she'd cut from her before they'd buried her body. Of her father, she had nothing.

She searched a little to the right and her fingers came across something hard and flat. A stone. She brushed off the ash. It was flat, perhaps a span square. She felt along the edges. It was stone mortared together. She wrestled it up and felt the mortar start to give way. Very carefully, she laid it to the side and removed the bag she'd been carrying across her neck and shoulder.

She reached into the box and felt a knife and something that felt like a heavy necklace. She put both into the bag then felt to see if there was anything else. Something wrapped in soft cloth. She felt very carefully all around, but there was nothing else. That was it, just three things.

She was going to draw her sack shut when she heard something crunch in the gravel her mother had used as a path from the back door. Sugar froze.

“I saw something.”

“Who cares?” a second man asked. “It’s just another one looking for some sleth souviner.”

Sugar wasn’t fully in the shadow of the hearth. But she knew that movement would draw the eye and decided not to risk it.

The men skirted the house. There were three of them. She’d been partially bent over when she’d heard the men, and she was starting to feel the strain of holding that position. She did have a candidate’s weave, which multiplied her strength and speed. But her body was tired. She’d been multiplied all night. A beat of sweat ran down her back.

“There’s nothing here,” one of them said. “Probably someone’s dog. Let’s go.”

She heard the crunching of gravel, but waited and began to count to three hundred. When she got to two hundred and thirty-eight, one of the men said, “See. There’s nothing here. Come on.”

“You idiot,” the second said. “This is why you’re such a lousy hunter. No patience. You can’t wait for bread to bake.”

“We’re chasing shadows while my wife is waiting for me in bed.”

The men moved away, but Sugar waited even longer this time. It was getting lighter. She had to go. She rose slowly and saw nobody there. She had one more thing to get.

The villagers had retrieved the skull of her father from the ashes and set it up on a pole at one of the village entrances for all to see. A warning and token of their great bravery. She was going to have that skull. If that was the only piece of her father that was left, then it wasn’t going to be used by the Fir-Noy of this village.

She moved away from the hearth and out into the yard. It was around this time only a few weeks before that she’d gone to the barn to feed the horses. She could hear her father’s hammering. Smell the hay and horses and charchol of Da’s furnace. It had all turned awful. The mob had come. She remembered the shouts of the men, the roaring of the house burning above her head. She remembered seeing them hack her father’s head from his body. In one day her life had turned into a nightmare of running and hiding and secrets she didn’t want to know. She’d lost everything of value that day. Everything except Legs, her blind little brother.

It was as if she were dead and living in some strange world. But she wasn’t dead. And she wouldn’t let these rotters get her and have any satisfaction. It was light enough now to see the outlines of the village houses. A windows showed burning candles within. Soon they whole village would be up, drawing water, feeding their animals. And even though she was multiplying herself even now, that didn’t mean someone with a bow couldn’t shoot her. She was, after all, only one young woman. She couldn’t outrun a horse at full gallop. Not yet. Perhaps when they

raised her to become a fell-maiden she might. But not now. She felt the weave about her upper right arm, a thin copper braid.

Someone walked with a lantern at the other end of the village. She would avoid the backs of the houses. That's where the animals, wells, and outhouses were. That's where the villagers would be. Instead, she walked out of the shadows and down the lane, the dirt smooth under her bare feet. It was the quickest path.

She passed the houses. Inside one, a father sang softly to his child. That would have been Gansh. The next few houses were still silent. She came to the village well and immediately cursed herself. An old man that looked like the one who had always sold her father seed peas stood drawing water. He hailed her a friendly good morning.

She hesitated. If she didn't say anything he'd suspect. So she said, "Fine morning to you, farmer Colt."

He stopped drawing his water, but kept on walking, quickening her pace.

"Lacey?" he called.

Sugar kept walking. When she moved behind the next house, she began to jog. In a minute she came to the entrance of the village. There were timbers all around. And a trench. They were going to build a palisades. But they were fools. A wall would never keep out things like the creature that had killed here after they'd attacked her family.

Sugar found the pole they'd erected. It must have been eleven feet high. And it wasn't a pole as much as a thick timber. She pushed on it, but couldn't budge it. They'd planted it deep. There was a sign on the front of it. She couldn't read much, but she could read these words for one was the name of her father: "Sparrow's End."

She shook her head. They wanted to commorate their brave deed and change the name of their village? But her father had not been part of the order. He had been a simple blacksmith. Large and fearsome in battle, yes. But they'd killed an innocent man. Not much honor in that.

Her mother, the one who had been using the dark magics. She they had wounded and taken for questioning, but she had gotten away. Been rescued by a creature of frightening power and proportions. What her mother had to do with it, she'd never know. They all suspected she'd simply been a target just as Zu Hogan had been. Just another lore user. But there was always a little doubt that made Sugar wonder.

Shouts rose back in the village.

She took her sack off, put her knife in her teeth, and began to climb the timber. In moments she was at the top. Her father's skull had been attached to the post with a leather strip and nail. She gripped the timber with her legs and cut the leather. She expected the skull to fall, but the leather had been baked hard by the sun and kept its form. So she put her knife back and secured it, then reached out and slid the head off of the leather strip.

Da had been such a big man that she expected his skull to be heavy. But it wasn't. It was as light as an apple.

Dogs began to bark. She looked out over the village and saw a lantern coming out of Solem's. Lords, he had pack of hunting dogs. Lords, she didn't have time to climb back down.

"Ho!" a man yelled. "There! She's stealing the skull!"

5. Sugar Chase

She sprang to the ground. They had been practicing jumps and falls at the fortress. If she was to multiply herself so she could leap bound like a mountain goat up and down cliffs (or houses, as spies) then she also needed to know how to land from such heights.

She wasn't high enough that she thought she needed to roll to break her fall. But she didn't want to risk breaking Da's skull, so she just sprang from the pole. She landed hard, jarring her ankles. Thankfully, she hadn't twisted on.

She picked up her sack and stuffed the skull in. As she ran she slipped the bag over her head and shoulder. The sun had risen enough that the eastern sky had hardened to gray. The west still showed stars, but it was enough to see by, especially with the moon.

“Stop!” Solem called. “Sleth!”

There were more shouts. Sugar glanced behind. Then she Solem began to let the dogs off their leashes. “Stu,” he called. “Take her!” She knew those command words. She’d watched the dogs in the competitions. At this speed, she was fast, but not fast enough to escape those dogs.

River had trained Sugar before Shim started training his army. She’d found she could multiply herself. Of course, River had forbidden it. It was too dangerous. If she lost control, she could kill herself. She had to keep the candidate’s weave on. But what else could she do?

She slipped the weave off and stuffed it into her sack. Two heart beats later she felt a surge of power, a flushing of life and vigor. The joy of it--lords.

The dogs were closing the distance. Parts of the road were still in shadow from the tall grass on the sides. But she knew she was dead if she kept at this pace.

Sugar let the power flow to her limbs. Felt it in her heart. Her breathing quickened. She measured her strides as she had practiced. She’d been warned that if you multiplied yourself too much you would overpower your breath. Breath was the thing. And then you’d fall to the ground panting or pass out. The lungs were the weak point.

But she’d never multiplied herself to that point. She didn’t know her limit. She’d be careful. But how could you tell with the rush of feeling she now felt?

Her legs pumped faster. She flew along the road, the wind blowing on her face. Her strides must have been seven or eight feet long each. Down one swell and up another. She could escape these dogs. It wasn’t fast enough to lose a rider. But she could lose the dogs. She felt so good she wanted to laugh.

She ran through a thin cloud of rising gnats. She didn’t blink fast enough and got two or three in her eyes. They felt like thorns. One went up her nose.

She blinked furiously, rubbed, and cleared her left eye. Her right eye ran like a river. She could barely see the road. She almost stumbled. Goh, it felt like her eye was being cut. But she didn't dare stop.

Lords, she thought. To be undone by something the size of a grain of sand. She quickened her pace again and glanced back. The dark forms of the dogs were approaching the bottom of the swell, sprinting in the morning half-light. They were still gaining on her, terrible and smooth, like pike shooting toward their prey in a river of shadow.

Shouts rose from her right. Three riders were racing toward her over the fields. The necks of their horses stretched out, their hooves throwing dark clots of dirt behind. One fence stood in their way. But she knew the lead rider at least. And his horse would leap that fence as easy as a frog leapt into the water.

She had planned on going back the way she'd come, but with the riders that was now impossible. Sugar built her Fire. Her limbs surged with joy. She shot forth. And this time should couldn't help herself. She felt the same giddiness rising in her chest as she did when jumping off the top of the Swan Creek falls to the pool below. She yelled out her joy and immediately realized this was what they had warned her about. This was the crazed mindlessness of the Fire joy.

She was panting, her lungs burning. But, lords of the sky, if she died this would be the way to go. Riding this surge of life was like riding a wild ferocious horse without saddle or stirrup. Perhaps if she just let it go. If she just flowed with it.

How fast was she running? Her strides were huge, light as a feather, and quick. She was flying. She heard the sounds of her pursuit recede behind her.

Could she go even faster?

No, she thought. No. And with a great effort she tried to reign in her flow. But it would not. She tried again. She focused. She bent all her might. Only then did it slow, and even so she had to fight it all the way. No wonder they'd told her to keep the candidate's weave on.

In her mind she realized she had almost lost herself. But the joy still surged through her. The memory of that wild delight still ran along her skin like the electric caress of a lover. And she did not feel the fear and relief she knew she should. Slower, she thought. Slower. And she reduced the flow again. This time it was easier.

She knew she was going to be in trouble when she got back to the fortress. There was no way she could lie out of this one. The Fir-Noy would make a stir. And who else but she would come here?

She glanced back. Her pursuit was still behind her, but they were not gaining on her. She could hold this pace. Not forever. You could run your body to death just as you could run a horse to death. Or to damage. Long-lasting damage. But she didn't feel pain. They'd warned her about that as well—the fire joy could bury the pain.

It didn't matter. She had to keep this pace. The fields raced past. The wind on her face was strong enough to make her eyes water.

She needed to be careful. There was more shouting behind, but she focused on her breathing, on her steps, on the dark road ahead. Being multiplied couldn't protect you from a loose rock that would turn your ankle. Or, she now knew, from gnats.

Nor did it harden your skin against arrows. Even if she could outrun her pursuers, there was no way she'd risk running across these fields. She'd seen movement in the darkness before she'd retrieved Da's skull. It could have been cattle in the shadows there, but it could have been men. The villagers had a number of decent bowmen among them. She had no idea how fast she

was running. But it wasn't fast enough to outrun arrows. She'd seen village archers take down deer on the run. She'd seen them take down the spotted wild dogs, which sometimes strayed in from the Gap. And those beasts were smaller and could run even faster.

At the same time, she couldn't stay on this road. It would only lead to the next village just a mile away. Up ahead on her left stood wild plum groves that were so tangled and thick it would stop the men on horse. But she doubted she'd gain any advantage over the dogs there. In fact, she suspected it would be the reverse.

She needed to terrain that would eliminate the advantages of both the horse and the dogs. She needed to get to moving water. The river Lion was close, just over a mile away.

If she cut through the woods here, she could slow the horse, but avoid the plum tangles. Her path would lead her to the trail that led to shacks of the river folk. There wasn't a ford along the river in this area. The river was deep for miles here. But she'd been there many a time. And she knew where two of the families hid their skiffs.

The river was where she needed to go. She could only hope the river folks weren't already up and checking their nets. But first she had to get through the woods without being caught by the dogs.

In the distance a small herd of sheep looked up from their grazing in the field to watch her.

On the next step Sugar turned and flew into the field. It had been cut recently and the stubble had hardened. The calluses on her bare feet were thick. She never wore shoes. But before she made the woods the stubble got her on the side of her toe where there weren't any calluses. A rock got her in the woods. Nevertheless she ran. She heard the men whistle once. She heard

barking of dogs. But the woods allowed her to put some distance between her and the horse. And then she was on the narrow trail. After half a mile, the dogs slowed their pace, and so did she.

She had no idea how long she could keep this up. Dreadmen and fell-maidens ate like they were starving. They had to in order to replenish the stores taken, in order to build up some fat to use in just this situation. But she hadn't been training or used to this. She felt a twinge in her knee. It would work into something joint-stiffening before the sun set this day. And that was only if she got away.

Before her rose the big house of a fisher family. She sped past and down the long river bank. Woodsmoke rose from the houses and shacks. She raced passed a boy carrying a net. Raced down to the trail along the water's edge to a skiff. She untied it and jumped in. Then she was out in the river, paddling for all she was worth, trying to get to the faster moving water.

Day 2

6. Argoth Naked

At first Argoth thought the naked man was simply someone who had continued to revel long after all the apple dances had ended. The only piece of clothing that he wore was a tattered blue scarf tied about his neck. He was holding a small herring by its tail and calling out to the small flock of gulls that were picking through the scraps and garbage left from the previous night's festivities that were held in the large square outside the south gate of Whitecliff city. The city of Whitecliff had held apple dances in three locations. The one outside the south gate was usually attended by those who liked to celebrate in a bit more ribald and rowdy way.

Argoth rode upon his horse. Shim rode next to him. Shim's guards had taken positions ahead and behind them. On both sides of the lane shop keepers were opening the wooden awnings of their houses, inviting customers to come buy. Out of the windows of the upper levels of the houses, servants were airing out bedding.

Two guards from the gate broke away from their position at the gate and began to walk toward the naked man with the fish.

Argoth had slept maybe only an hour last night. He did not feel his family was safe at his house any longer, not with something stalking the woods. And what had that wisterwife been doing at the edge of his woods anyway? Wisterwives were the servants of Glories. Which meant they were the servants of devourers. Which meant some enemy was moving against them and knew who Argoth was.

No, it was not safe at his house any longer. He was not going to let his family sleep there during the night. Nor would he suggest his guests do so either. So he'd led them all down the road to the walled village of Stag Home, the whole group thinking every moment that something awful was going to rush out at them from the dark woods and fields on either side of the road.

Once his guests were safe, he'd had continued on to take the body of the wisterwife to Rogum's Defense, the fortress where Shim's army was headquartered.

A long night, a lot of worry, and now he rode along with Shim to meetings with the commanders of the garrisons in Whitecliff.

As Argoth rode into the square, the guards walked through the gulls. One of the guards jabbed the butt of his poleaxe at one bird and yelled. A number of birds startled, then, in a rush of flapping wings, the whole flock fled, taking to the sky.

The naked man watched them leave in dismay. All men were tattooed. Argoth now knew it was the way the devourers marked their human livestock. He couldn't see the man's wrist tattoos clearly from this distance, but knew they were not those of any Mokaddian or Koramite. This was a foreigner. Then Argoth saw his eyes. They were a brownish orange. A Mungonite.

The gulls flew up to perch on the wooden roof the battlement on the top of the city wall. Angry, the naked man cursed at the guards. They guards approached, trying to pin him between them, but the naked Mungonite was quick. A little too quick, Argoth thought. He dodged between the two of them and ran to the gate.

“That’s a lovely sight,” said Shim. “You think I should use that get up to impress the ladies?”

“Oh, yes,” said Argoth, “but I would place the scarf a bit more strategically.”

“Ah,” said Shim. “A bit of the old hide and peek.” He turned to the guard behind him. “Mystery is what a woman wants. On our next feast night I want to see you in that.”

Shim was as hard a man as Argoth had ever met. He looked like he was made from boiled leather and revealed just as much in his expressions. And so when he said such things people who didn’t know him had a difficult time determining whether he was serious or joking. This guard was new and looked at Shim with shock.

“What?” demanded Shim. “You don’t fancy ladies?”

“I,” the man stammered. “It will be so, Zu.”

“Indeed it will,” said Shim. Then he turned back around. He glanced out of the corner of his eye at Argoth, the smallest hint of a grin betraying his intent.

All of Shim’s guards went through some hazing. Argoth had no doubt this new one had been prepared by the others to know that Shim was a hard and eccentric man who tested his men’s loyalty with odd demands. He had no doubt this man would show up at the next feast night wearing nothing but a blue scarf.

Shim patted the neck of his black Burund stallion. It was a magnificent animal, bred for speed. “Sloppy work by those two guards,” he said. “Let’s see if the others do any better.”

As the naked drew close to the gates, one of the guards stepped out with his poleaxe barring the way. But the naked man put on a burst of speed, and before the guard could react, he had run through the gate.

Shim sighed. “Sloppy. I’ve got to fight the Western Glorydoms with this?”

“I don’t think that’s a drunken reveler,” said Argoth. Moments later the Mungonite emerged from the gate tower onto the battlement then disappeared again. He reappeared, scrambling to the top of the wooden roof of the battlement, the herring clenched between his teeth. When he got to the top, he straddled the peak and began walking towards the gulls, fish held out in front of him, calling to the birds like they were his pets.

There were shouts from the guards. The gulls became edgy, then all but one of them launched themselves in the air. The naked man continued forward carefully. The gull eyed him.

On the other side of the gull a soldier was heaved up through an access to the roof by his comrades. As the soldier climbed, the gull saw him, let out a cry, and launched from the roof. The naked man tried to catch it, but missed. He stood upon the roof of the battlement looking heart-broken. He called out to the bird.

The soldier said, “Look, you can’t be up here. Come down.”

The Mungonite ignored him.

“You come over her now,” said the soldier, “Or I’ll drag you.”

The Mungonite continued to call to the bird. So the soldier walked over to him and grabbed his wrist. The soldier was muscular, but the naked man wrenched out of his grasp. The soldier got angry and grabbed for the man again. But the man, with astonishing speed, struck the soldier in the gut, then the face, then he kicked one of his feet out from underneath him. The soldier fell onto the roof and began to slide down the far side. The city wall was twenty feet high.

“He’s a visitor,” Argoth said to Shim. That was his way of saying the man was sleth without proclaiming it for everyone to hear. When Shim had indicated he wanted to raise a kingdom of loremen on these shores, Argoth had sent word to all the Groves he knew and trusted, asking them to join with them. The visitors had begun to trickle in a few weeks ago. A complication with the process was that the Order of Hismayas was not the only order of lore users. There were others that did not follow the strict rules, some which crossed the line into abomination. And so it was important that the visitors be identified and brought in before they caused too much of a stir. The problem with this man was that Argoth had not sent any messages to any Groves in Mungo.

The soldier continued to slide. He yelled when he fell. His comrades had had enough of the naked man. A man with a bow appeared in one of the embrasures of the gate tower that rose above the battlement roof. Before Argoth could say anything, the bowman released his arrow.

The naked man must have seen the bowman from the corner of his eye, for he turned and with blinding speed, batted the arrow aside.

“Ho,” said Shim. “Now that’s something.”

The bowman nocked another arrow.

“Hold!” Shim called up.

The bowman drew.

“I’ll have your hide!” Shim yelled.

Another guard in the tower drew the bowman’s attention to Shim. The bowman looked then lowered his bow.

Shim urged his horse forward to the edge of the dry moat that ran around the city wall. He yelled up at the Mungonite. "I know Mungo worships the sun, but you can't do it up there, friend. Come down."

The naked man ignored him, looking up at the gulls that were wheeling away over the houses outside the wall.

A tall man with a large blond moustache stepped forward from those in the square who had stopped to watch. He led a saddled horse. "Zu," he said to Shim, "You'll not get him that way. I know. I sailed with the blighter, and he was murder to fetch out of the rigging." The man was Mokaddian, but not from one of the main clans in the New Lands.

"And who might you be?" asked Shim.

"Berosus from Lem," he said.

"Old country," said Shim.

"Yes," he said. "My cousin Sims wrote me about the wonders of this place. I've come to join him. Maybe see if one of the clans will let me open up new land."

Argoth perked up his ears. That was part of the code he'd written in his call to the Groves. In order to make more land arable, the clans would sometimes make an offer to any who would do the work. If they cleared the land, they could get the tenure on land, and only owe the clan lords rent.

Shim knew the code as well. He said, "There are a lot of Sims here. Which one were you referring to?"

"A fisherman," he said and made the first sign that identified a man as a user of the forbidden lore. The sign was made with the hand and arm and was used between the Groves and

orders. Each order had other tokens and signs that would allow members to identify true members. Of course, it wasn't always safe because the Divines had their spies and infiltrators.

A shout pulled Argoth's attention back up to the roof. The naked man was running along the roof away from the gate tower. He suddenly cut, and ran down the slope. When he got to the edge, he jumped flying out over the dry moat. It was an amazing leap and nothing that a commoner could perform. This man was indeed sleth.

He landed at the edge of the dry moat, breaking his fall with a roll. The moat itself was dug with various traps that included caltrops and spikes. But he had landed past these and was up and running in the blink of an eye. He sped away.

"Bosh," Shim said to the captain of his guards.

"Even if they catch up to him, they're going to have a time roping that one," said Berosus.

"I think my men would dispute that."

"Our naked friend has skills. It would be easiest if someone with equal skills went after him. Let me fetch him for you. We'll call it a gift of good intent"

Shim regarded Berosus for a moment. "You bring him to me at Rogum's Defense, and we'll talk."

The naked man was racing away, heedless of the effect his speed was having on the people here.

Berosus mounted his horse. He saluted Shim then set off at a trot.

Shim turned back to Argoth. "Did you see him? Running around on that roof like a squirrel, batting away arrows."

"It was hard to miss," said Argoth.

“We could use him.”

“No,” said Argoth. “A man like that won’t stand in line and face the enemy. He won’t obey orders. A man like that can’t be counted on.” There were indeed many that might bear the title of sleth that would be useful, but it was clear that the Mungonite was damaged. Argoth knew they risked exactly this when he put out his call for aid. And he wondered now if he’d made a mistake.

I didn’t say I’d put him up front to lead the army,” said Shim. “I said we could use him.”

“You know what your opposition claims.” There were those of the Clans who feared Shim was controlled by dark masters. “Someone like that would only confirm their bad assessment.”

“Captain,” Shim said. “You fight lies with the truth. Our friend has skills. If we can learn them, we will. If he turns out to be unstable, then we’ll use him to remove some of the fears people feel. Make a man a mystery and it creates a gulf with other men, makes him odd or something to be feared. If we were Divines, that’s exactly what we’d want. But we’re not. I’m going to let the people get up close. I want them to see that he’s nothing more than a man.”

Shim had no caution. And yet, hadn’t Hogan said the same of Argoth? He found it ironic that he had taken the role of the conservative now that Hogan was gone. But these were new times. Shim wanted to bring the Order out of the shadows into the light. It just felt so uncomfortable. “He’s from no group I know,” said Argoth. “We have no idea where he’s from. We just need to be careful.”

“Careful is my name,” said Shim.

“Liar,” said Argoth.

Another commotion rose behind them. Argoth turned. A rider raced down the road on a nag, yelling for people to get out of the way. When he spotted Shim, he turned his animal. Shim's guards moved in between the man and Shim. But he wasn't bent on any injury. He was a common Clansman. Not a weapon on him. His face was full of urgency.

"Lord Shim," the man said. He reined in his horse. The animal was lathered from a long run. "The village Applethorn, it's been cursed."

"What are you talking about?" asked Shim.

"I went there this morning to visit my sister. It's awful. The people, the cattle, the dogs—they're all dead."

So he was an upland fruit farmer.

"An attack?" asked Shim.

"No," said the fruit farmer. "There's not a scratch on them."

7. **Argoth** The Frights of Applethorn

Argoth would have suspected to find the village of Applethorn full of uplanders who had passed out from too much drink and perhaps not a little of that wicked herb sinnis. But the fruit farmer had reported the cattle being affected. Uplanders could sometimes be imbiciles, but even they wouldn't waste cider getting their cattle drunk.

So perhaps the problem was the water supply. But why poison the water of Applethorn? It was a village of no consequence. Argoth had made sure the fruit farmer himself sober and sane. All seemed right. Still, Argoth couldn't imagine a whole village laid waste without some sign of struggle.

The road to Applethorn was no wider than the width of a wagon. Argoth eyed the woods on either side, looking past the bare branches for any sign of danger. It cut through a thickly wooded swath of highland. At this elevation the fall frosts and winds had already stripped most of the leaves and scattered them in a thick carpet of yellows and pale reds onto the forest floor

and the road. The leaves crunched underneath the horse hooves. Argoth loved the smell of leaf mold, and it lay thick in the cool air here, but he couldn't enjoy it.

Shim rode next to Argoth. About two-dozen soldiers rode with them. All wore candidate weaves of might. They weren't full dreadmen, but they'd been awakened, and even a little extra speed and strength could tip a battle. Trailing the group was a wagoneer with a two-horse team. Argoth didn't know what they'd find in the village, but if there were any injured, he wanted to have enough transport for them.

In his vest he carried a silver case that contained the last hag's tooth that Rubaloth, the Skir Master of Mokad, had brought to these shores. The tooth looked like a long silver spike, but it was more than metal. It was a weave, a living thing. The Skir Master had called the teeth "ravelers." And that was probably the more accurate name, for they unraveled the bindings of body, Fire, and soul, and by so doing killed whatever they could burrow into.

In Argoth's belt were tucked the gauntlets that would allow him to handle this last tooth. However, he didn't know if it might prove useful in a fight with whatever was stalking the woods. The other two teeth had, ultimately, failed to destroy the monster of the beautiful, dark god they'd faced deep in the ancient Stone-wight warrens. Sugar, Purity's daughter, had stabbed the monster with two of the teeth. The spikes had flashed to life and wriggled into the dirt and stone that made up that creature's flesh. But it had rooted them both out and turned them into nothing but twisted hunks of metal. Against such a monster, the tooth he held would only distract. But a distraction might mean the difference between an escape and certain death.

The road bent around one lone birch that still clung to most of its butter yellow leaves. They weren't far from the village, but the three guards ahead had stopped. Two large branches blocked the road. They had fallen from what looked to be a huge, insect infested tree. The lead

riders tied ropes from the thick branches to their saddle pommels. Then they began to drag the branches to the side of the road.

“How long have those sat there?” asked Shim, disgust showing on his leathern face.

“Look at the leaves.”

Leaves clung thickly to the branches, but they were not the deep red of those that remained in the tree; they were, instead, a desiccated green, which meant the branches had fallen weeks ago, before the leaves had begun to turn color.

“And nobody to clean it up,” said Shim. “A road is a precious thing. Bodies spent hours breaking this.”

“To be fair,” said Argoth, “this isn’t the road they’d take for market.”

“Doesn’t matter,” said Shim. “This is one of the roads leading to the post at the Gap. And there, look there.” He pointed at a sapling growing on the edge of the road. “That’s the third I’ve seen.”

The Gap was just that—a gap in the mountains that separated the Wild from the settled lands. The Wilds was a land of dangers and fell beasts. For many years nothing much had come through the gap. But there were reports that woodikin and wurms were coming through. So Shim was right: this road was important. And it was true the lord of this district was known for his shabbiness. However, a few saplings didn’t mean the crews were slacking. But Argoth wasn’t going to argue because well-maintained roads was one of Shim’s hobby horses. And if you got him on it, he’d ride it until you agreed to give him half of all your possessions to just be quiet.

But Argoth didn’t need to worry about that because a mule appeared on the road ahead, dragging a two-wheeled vegetable cart. There was no driver and the reins hung down in the posts

sticking out the front to which the mule was harnessed. The mule limped and looked as if it had had spooked, leaving its owner, or perhaps throwing him from the cart.

One of the guards grabbed the mule by the reins and turned the cart. By the time he had it facing back from the way it came, Argoth had reined his horse to a stop along side. It was empty except for a scattering of old, wrinkled cherries that had caught in the cracks and joints of the cracked and weathered boards used for the cart's bed.

Shim ordered his men to bring the cart with them, and they continued along the road. Argoth kept expecting to see the driver laying drunk in the leaves on the side of the road. Or with a broken neck having fallen asleep and taken a tumble. But there was no driver, nothing but the carpet of fallen leaves rustling underhoof. They continued along the leaf-strewn road for a quarter of an hour until it widened onto the community of Applethorn.

The village comprised about twenty wood and plaster houses strung out along two roads, surrounded by gardens, fields, and three large orchards. The first thing that Argoth noticed was the stillness. There should have been people hauling and stacking firewood for the coming winter, working in yards and barns. Wives should have been pickling the last of the vegetables over large fires in the yards. There should have been a dog or two come to greet them.

The upland villages grew apples and cherries far sweeter than anything that could be grown in the lowlands. Heaps of pruned branches stood in the orchards around Applethorn. And what had been pruned showed that Applethorn meticulously cared for their orchards. But the pruning was not finished. Crews of adults and children should have been out there despite last nights festivities.

But there wasn't a body to be seen. All was silent. The only thing that moved was a thin ribbon of smoke rising from the chimney of a house down the road.

“I saw a village like this once,” said Shim. “Long before you arrived on the boat. woodikin had slaughtered the inhabitants down to the last child. If they’ve started coming through the passes again, then Applethorn would make a good target.”

Woodikin, Argoth thought. They used poison darts and wasps in their battles. That might account for the fruit farmer’s report that there hadn’t been a scratch on them. Except that woodikin often cut off ears as prizes.

Shim ordered his men to be ready with their bows and to watch for woodikin spoor.

Up ahead lay the first body. It was a pale ox lying on its side in the road. Argoth rode closer to inspect its means of death. The road here was sprinkled with small yellow leaves. The ox had fallen on top of them. Its dark eyes were open and had begun to dry. It was too late in the season for flies. The cold would also prevent a quick bloating, but even with the cold slowing that process, he suspected it had been killed only this morning.

There was no sign of violence. There was no blood-darkened ground. No blemish on the hide. No woodikin darts. It looked to have simply fallen dead.

“This isn’t woodikin,” said Argoth.

“They use more than darts,” said Shim.

“It would have been too cold up here for wasps,” said Argoth. “And how many would it take to kill an ox anyway?”

The riders ahead of Argoth and lord Shim fanned out, some moving to ride behind the houses.

Shim shrugged. “Look there,” he said and motioned with his chin. At the corner of a fenced garden lay a brindled bulldog.

Argoth nudged his horse forward. The garden had been prepared for winter, its rows of beets and carrots covered with a thick layer of leaves and held down with a thin layer of dirt. A large set of wooden windpipes that had been fastened onto a pole at the edge of the garden by the dog. These were uplanders, after all, and believed in giving the wind a voice.

Like the ox the dog lay dead. Its tongue lay out of its mouth, dried. But he could see signs of a struggle here. The dog's back had been broken.

Shim reached in his tunic and scratched his chest. One of the soldiers called out. He'd found a dead woman. Another sounded: two dead children. The calls did not stop. A family. More dogs. Dead pheasants. Dead goats and horse.

"I don't see woodikin tracks," said Argoth.

"This isn't the Fir-Noy clan either," said Shim.

"No," said Argoth, "they would have killed the people and stolen everything else."

He scanned the orchards and fields. He regarded the wooded tree line beyond. All was silent and still, except for that thinly smoking chimney. "Ready yourself," he said to Shim and nudged his horse.

He put on the Skir Master's gauntlets. They were made of a whitened leather, studded with gold. They felt soft as gloves. In the palm of each gauntlet was a round disc as thin as a coin, but made of gold. He supposed that was the weave that allowed a person wearing the gauntlets to handle the hag's tooth.

They pulled their horses to a stop in front of the house. The house was a simple one with a main room for living and cooking and another to the side. It was built in the fashion of all the rest with board and plaster and a thatched roof, except painted on the door were two stalks of

barley which announced this as the residence of an ale-wife. The door stood slightly ajar, revealing a glimpse into the dark room beyond.

He dismounted and tied his horse to a hitching post outside the home. Then he armed himself withdrew the hag's tooth in one hand and his sword in the other. Shim and one of the soldiers dismounted as well.

Argoth walked through a drift of leaves that had collected along this side of the house. "Hoy," Argoth called out. "Is anyone home?"

There was no reply. He walked up to the porch. Listened, but heard nothing. He pushed the door inward with his foot. It glided silently on its hinges and then uttered one creak. The room had one window that stood unshuttered, allowing the light of the day to dimly illuminated what was inside.

Argoth called out again, but received no answer. He stepped inside. The floor in this main room appeared to have been replaced in the last month for the boards were unpainted and so newly cut he could still smell the wood. On his right was a bar. He turned to his left and found a young woman. She lay sprawled across one of the two tables as if she'd been tossed there. When he stepped closer he found there was no cut, no odd angles that would tell him she'd been broken. She looked like a woman who had fallen across a table and never gotten back up.

Shim and the soldier moved into the room and headed toward the back. Argoth looked more closely at the woman. There wasn't a strong odor of death. She'd stiffened, but wasn't yet bloated. He turned her. No blood. Not a mark on her.

Argoth had seen bodies lying like this before in a plague town , but there wasn't any sign of pestilence about her. She was clean. Her skin clear.

"Gods," said Shim. "Argoth!"

Argoth turned, ready to strike with the hag's tooth.

Shim pushed the door of the back room open with the tip of his sword. "They're like leeches."

Argoth pushed past the soldier to join Shim. The first thing he saw was the dirty bare foot of a man lying on the floor. The man, probably the young woman's husband, lay on his back. He was naked except for his small clothes. All about him, lined up like suckling pigs, were the grotesque bodies of a dozen frights. Some were the size of rats, others as long as his arm. All of them looked starved. They were knobby and twisted, the color of pale driftwood. Their many fingers, as thin and spidery as the roots of a tree, grasped their prey. They were attached to his thighs, his stomach. One at his neck. The mass of them moved and undulated in the dim light, sucking the Fire from the man.

One of them turned and looked up at Argoth with one cancerous eye. Then the man on the floor opened his mouth and gasped.

"Godsweed," Argoth said. "Fetch the godsweed!"

The soldier ran out and came back moments later with a braid of godsweed. He lit in the embers of the dying fire. Argoth took the smoking knot from him and blew on it. The embers reddened. He blew again. The embers glowed brighter. Then he walked into the room and began to smoke the frights.

Frights were creatures not wholly of the world of flesh. They fed on Fire, and so it was common to find them lurking about the sick and dying. They haunted battlefields. For reasons unknown to Argoth, when they fed on Fire they became visible to the naked eye.

It took two knots of godsweed to disperse the horde of frights in the house. Never had he seen so many together. The man was glassy-eyed and drooling. He did not respond and Argoth suspected he wasn't long for this world.

Another soldier entered the house. "Lord Shim," he said. "We've found the bulk of the villagers."

Argoth and Shim followed the soldier. There were some of the villagers found dead in their houses or outside their barns, but the majority of them were lying at the edge of a cherry orchard. There were sixty three in all, men, women, and children. The bodies were cool, and there were no frights Argoth could see, but they ordered them smoked anyway.

There were no marks on the people. There had been a bonfire. There were a lot of footprints, but nothing special. Then a soldier found prints of something else. Something large. Argoth thought it looked like the print he'd seen in the woods by his house.

"Lord Shim," a soldier called.

Argoth and Shim turned. Three soldiers carried small children in their arms—a girl and two boys, none of them were older than eight years. Shock shown in their eyes.

"We found these three hiding between the rafters and thatch of a barn. And we wouldn't have seen them in the shadows, but one of the men threw open the hay door to let some light in and there they were, the three of them huddled up in their cubby, silent as stone and watching us with their sober eyes."

Shim addressed the oldest boy. "What's your name, son?"

The boy did not speak.

"It's alright. I'm Lord Shim. These are my men. We'll protect you."

Argoth stroked the boy's hair and touched his arm. "I've got a girl about your age. What are you? Five?"

The little girl in the Dreadman's arms leaned forward, holding her arms out for Argoth to take her. Argoth took the girl. "Come here, darling," he said. And he stroked her. She was heavy and solid, a little stone. She put her face into his chest. He soothed and stroked her face and hair. "Can you tell us what happened?"

"The woods filled up with darkness," the smaller boy said. "Da came running, and a man yelled, and the whole wood was breathing. And mother ran with us to the barn and told us to hide. But when we got to the cubby mother was gone." His lip began to quiver.

"Where did she go?"

The boy said nothing, the horror of that moment showing in his eyes. But the older one finally spoke. "They took her to the horned evil in the smoke."

8. **Gnolum** Enemy Flesh

The trio of brothers lay in wait as the shadow hunter approached. The brothers had not seen a shadow hunter for many years. Not since the days following the Great and Terrible, the battle in which almost all their kind had been cut down by the Rhiss and their dark slaves. But those few handfuls of the People that had escaped the battlefield did not find peace. They were hunted. It had been decades since the brothers had seen another of the People. They had called with the long voice, but there had been no reply, and so they assumed they were now the last three of their kind.

They were lucky Goosh has spotted the shadow hunter a few hours ago or there might have only been two of the People left. Rawch, the oldest of the brothers, acted as a diversion on the far bank of the river, skinning the small deer they'd killed as the blood drained down into a large bowl. The organs had been put aside. They would be delicious bites. In fact, Stone, the brother whose head was full of languages, was with Rawch, pretending to be asleep, but

salivating at the smell of the fresh liver, kidney, and heart. Goosh, the killer, lay deep in the water waiting.

It was evening. The long shadows of the trees hid the hunter, which stole down to the river silent as a snake and waited in the thick willows there, still as a heron, its skin changing color to blend in. In fact, Stone wondered if it had actually moved away. But then it slipped into the water.

Stone grunted in the low voice, the one shadow hunters could not hear. Rawch cut around a leg and pulled the skin off, biting off a piece of raw fat, acting as if he noticed nothing. The shadow hunter moved quietly through the water.

"Ready," said Stone in the low voice.

"I had forgotten the thrill of battle," said Rawch. "It is strange to feel it."

The shadow hunter was now swimming in the deep part of the river. "Our moment," said Stone and stood, a massive bow in hand. He drew back the arrow that had been made from a tree limb. Rawch picked up his staff blade and turned.

The shadow hunter stopped swimming. The water was not its favored place, which is why they had lured it here. At that moment Goosh struck, yanking it below the surface. He was supposed to stab it if he could. The shadow hunter thrashed, then rose again. It was bleeding, but not from the chest. Stone released his arrow. It struck the shadow hunter in the shoulder. The creature cried out, startling a whole flock of birds from a nearby tree.

"No good," said Rawch, moving down to the water's edge.

Stone drew back another of his arrows and waited. The shadow hunter was yanked down again, but it slashed down with its claws. Goosh must have let it go, for it turned to swim for the far shore.

"Take your time, Charity," Rawch said, using Stone's formal rank.

Stone knew he would have just this one shot. He needed to strike the creature in the chest. He breathed out to steady himself, aimed, and released. The arrowed moaned as it sped out over the water.

The shadow hunter turned to mark it, but it was too slow and the arrow skewered it just left of the center of its chest. The shadow hunter cried out again. It was a harsh cry, but the river did not listen.

The shadow hunter flailed weakly. In moments it bellied up and began to float downstream like a piece of jetsam. It was not quite dead yet.

Goosh broke the water's surface with his head and followed.

Stone was hungry and did not think the deer would be enough for all three of them. "Is a shadow hunter good to eat?"

"It wanted to kill us," said Rawch. "I expect it will be very tasty."

"Then I will cook and eat the head," said Stone.

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Later, Goosh returned carrying the body of the shadow hunter over his shoulder. He laid it down before them. Shadow hunters were not as large as the People, but they were deadly. A pack of them were to be feared. The tattoos and markings on its silvery green skin were unlike those of any slaves of the Rhiss they had encountered.

"We've entered the far reaches of the lands of those who rule the Naked," said Goosh.

"They call themselves Men," Stone reminded him. Many years ago he'd lived among them, savoring their ways and their odd words.

"Men," Goosh corrected himself.

They had come because an allyqueen of the People of the Wasp had sent one of her wasp masters to them to say there were yet some who fought the Rhiss. Those resisting had not been the People of the Wasp, but Men, which did not surprise Stone. "Men can have moments of great strength," said Stone. His brothers weren't as sure of their purpose here as he. It was his job to remind them.

"Men are like insects," said Rawch. "Men are easily enthralled."

"We can kill those who are servants of the Rhiss," said Stone. "We can train the rest."

"Men taste good," said Goosh, "although you must ensure you only eat enemies."

Rawch and Stone rumbled their assent.