



Fables

from

the

Dark

Written
by

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Fales from the Dark

A Recollection of the Unmapped Passages & Chambers of the Dark Castle	4
The Cook's Tale.....	8
The Mason's Tale.....	14
The Tanner's Tale	18
The Hunter's Tale	24
The Smith's Tale.....	28
The Tailor's Tale	32
The Abbot's Tale	37
The Miller's Tale	42
The Fletcher's Tale.....	46
The Bishop's Tale.....	50
The Shepherd's Tale.....	54
The Butcher's Tale	58
Terror of the Underworld	64
The Death Knight	66
The Shapeshifter.....	70
Keeper of the Hoard.....	72
The Dark One	74
The Master of Darkness	76
Champion of the Fighting Pits	78
The Entity	80
The Beastmaster	82
The Undead Queen.....	84
The Hydra	86
The Plague Lord.....	88
The Demented Priestess	90
The Player of Games	92

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You throw open the door and feel relieved to see the chamber within lies empty. You step inside, dwarfed by the towering bookshelves which now surround you – row upon row of dusty tomes rising high into the darkness on every side. You have found it; the castle library. Before you, laid open on a lectern by the light of a solitary candle, is the book you have been seeking all these years - the manuscript you have heard whisper of, the key to your escape from this accursed place. There is not a moment to lose. You pull the door closed behind you, step forward and begin to read:

A Recollection of the Unmapped Passages & Chambers of the Dark Castle

By Firips Etsac

Do not look over your shoulder, prisoner. Rest easy. Draw breath. Lay your weary palms upon this ancient tome and settle your jangling nerves. You have found it - the final chapter of your quest. You were wise to seek out this library, prisoner. Wise, to avoid the temptation to which countless souls before you have so foolishly succumbed. Not for you, to scurry blindly from passage to passage, chamber to chamber, seeking an exit but finding only your doom. You are no fool, and that is why these words were crafted just for you. Here, in this very room, will your incarceration end, as it does for all who enter here, all who through my grace seek out and read these hallowed pages.

Though time may appear short, shorter even than your panicked breathing, briefer still than the irregular spaces between the beats of your frantic heart, rest easy. Do not look over your shoulder. You must study the words of these pages carefully, prisoner. It is here that I, keeper of the riddle none before you have solved, shall guide you with three simple lessons.

It will be important for you to know that I was once like you - a prisoner of this castle. This is how I came to know the manner of escape that shall be imparted to you presently. Of course, there are those who believe this place to be inescapable, impregnable from within or without - and with good reason. For surely never has such an immense construction of towering, dense walls, soaring towers, and innumerate passages been known in all the kingdoms of all the lands - and just as sure it is to say it never will again. This is a place, you have doubtless detected, not entirely possible, yet possible. Therein lies your first lesson.

Have you felt it, when first you saw its shadow rising into the night? When first you ventured below to where its impossible tunnels sprawl into distorted caverns as endless as the mind itself? Have you seen, from its dizzying towers, the mist-covered landscape in which it lies - the twisted, ancient forest, the perilous mountains beyond? Have you heard the wailing of the long-forgotten prisoners, carried through the dark in vain? And all this beneath the foreboding churn of restless, storm-clad skies - themselves unable to resist the almighty darkness emanating from this place. Of course you have. It is this knowledge, prisoner, this which has brought you here, these things which have ushered you into this room, to these pages at this moment, in the desperate hope to end your torment. And I who knew it would be so. Knowing all this, who then could truly claim to have escaped this place? None but I. This is your second lesson.

Do not look over your shoulder, prisoner, for I have much to impart. As I recall, the Abbot was the first to fail. He and his Miller companion found only the pain of the torturer's table waiting for them. The Cook and Tanner came next, faring little better, falling at the hands of some terrible beast, swiftly returned to rot in even darker cells. As for the Smith and the Tailor? Their terror was the greatest of all, and its resonance will feed the dark hungers of the castle's denizens for many years to come. And what of you, prisoner?

There, it is enough. I will conclude my writings here. This will be your final lesson;

I was no prisoner, fool, and there is no escape for you. Understand one thing before you die - that while its many prisoners may come and go, its leaders wax and wane, it is I alone who serve eternal, ensuring that the agony of this place will endure for all of time. For I am the spirit of the castle, and for every soul that enters here I hold the key - the trap, the secret lure,

The method to bring them each to certain doom, diverting their senses while I take form and creep soundlessly upon them. For you, these simple passages were enough. Now we end it. Look over your shoulder, prisoner, for I have come to claim you.



Your adventure ends here.

The Cook's Tale

†

The Cook inspected her latest creation with pride. To her, it was the very pinnacle of culinary creation - a steaming meat pie. The pastry she had rolled thin and arranged into countless layers; the meat she had cleaned, sliced, and seared; the herbs she had finely chopped, the seasonings measured precisely, the berries, the butter, all applied to practised perfection. And now, it emerged from the oven a new and complete thing, a dish of true beauty, a feast for the senses. In truth, the making of it had become second nature, but seeing the finished article would never become stale.

This particular pie was bound for the inn, so the Cook wrapped it in cloth, took it up and made to leave her kitchen. Opening the door, she started, almost dropping the pie. There stood the Tanner, her hand raised as if to knock. The woman looked embarrassed. This was to be expected, but she also looked tired - dark circles sagging beneath her eyes where usually she was bright and fair.

“Sorry. Those skins?” was all the Tanner could manage, gesturing to a large wooden basket beside the door.

The Cook smiled. “I left them out to fester specially for you. Help yourself.”

“My thanks, I-”

“Worry not,” said the Cook. “Get some sleep and I’ll fix you something special on the morrow, hmm?”

The Tanner brightened a little at this. “And perhaps we could talk?”

The Cook nodded, “Of course, my dear.” There was an awkward silence between them for just a moment. The Cook indicated her pie. “Well, it’s getting cold. I’d better...”

“Oh of course,” the Tanner laughed nervously. “You have my thanks for the skins.”

The two women parted, and soon the Cook arrived at the inn. The innkeeper was grateful to receive the pie and a few patrons eyed it eagerly on its path from threshold to counter. With her delivery complete, a good day was nearly over. All that remained was to pick some fresh berries from the woodland for tomorrow’s tarts. The Cook stopped home to collect her punnet, then headed out of the village in high spirits as the sun began to set.

*

“Who’s been at my berries?” huffed the Cook.

Usually this secretive spot in the woodland was a sure bet – her very own private berry spring. But today it appeared as though someone else had beaten her to it, for little fruit remained. With daylight fast receding the Cook had only half-filled her punnet, and her perfect day suddenly seemed in jeopardy. She lay the basket on the ground and crouched, crawling to reach deep and low into the bushes for a branch that bore unclaimed fruit. That is when she saw it - a mark in the soil, a track. She made it out as belonging to an animal, though of what sort she couldn’t say. It was a pawprint, much like that of a dog, but larger. Not a wolf, she was sure of that. Anyone who travelled these woods knew the sight of those. This was something else. She spotted another, and another. They led away, deeper into the woodland. Forgetting her berries, the Cook rose to follow them. She loved all the woodland creatures and catching sight of whatever beauty left these marks would be a fine end to a fine day.

The tracks stretched on for almost a mile before reaching an open, barren landscape she could not recall having seen before – though she knew these woods like she knew her oven. A swirling mist rolled across the ground before her, and nothing stirred save for a solitary raven which pecked at the hard soil before cawing and taking flight. Unnerved, the Cook withdrew, collecting her punnet and returning

home. She slept poorly, dreaming of strange shadows and ravens without beaks pecking hard upon a stone wall.

In the morning, the Cook made it her first order of business to call on the Tanner. Her knocking went unanswered and the Cook resolved to try again later. The village was beginning to hum with the morning's activities as she walked home to warm the oven and begin her day's work. A little down the way, she passed the Shepherd, her pack of young hounds close at heel. One of them peeled off and began excitedly licking the Cook's fingers. She chuckled, catching the attention of the Shepherd who whistled to call it off, dipping her knees in apology before leading her dogs away. It gave the Cook an idea.

*

The innkeeper had not minded handing back a small piece of the pie. He had raised an eyebrow, to be sure, but the Cook had nonetheless come away with a tear of cloth containing a nice juicy slice of her finest dish. She set it aside before she got to work for the day, crushing what berries she had collected the previous evening to fill a smaller than expected batch of sweet tarts. Once that was done, and with the sun setting, she took her cue. Clutching the pie close at her side, she found her way back to the barren land where the tracks of the mysterious animal had ended. At what she thought to be the right spot, she placed the pie on the ground, tutting as she noticed some of the juices had leaked through the cloth and stained her tunic.

Concealing herself several paces away in the nearby undergrowth, she watched her trap eagerly. None of the beastly patrons of the inn could resist her pies – and neither the Shepherd's dog. She was sure this beast would be no different. The place still unnerved her, with its stillness of the air and the lack of life in the fields beyond the mist. But inside, her belly fluttered with curiosity. Just to get a look at it, that would be enough.

The novelty had worn off quicker than expected. After half an hour, the Cook grew cold and began to have thoughts of abandoning the

game. But then, suddenly, there was movement in the mist - a loping shadow. A tingle of excitement shot through her. Surely this would be her creature. Its silhouette drew closer, and at last she saw it. It was tall as a man, broad, with shaggy black fur and a large pair of keen, silvery eyes. It was some kind of hound, but huge, like nothing she had ever seen. In a heartbeat, the game wasn't fun anymore. The sight of the hound chilled her even more than this eerie moor, appealing to some base instinct of terror. *I must flee.* As this thought passed through her mind, it was as if the beast read it too. Sniffing the air, it broke into an alarming stride, heading straight for her. The Cook froze. She stared as, with one lap of a broad black tongue, the beast inhaled the portion of pie she had left. It scratched at the earth where the bait had been with an immense paw, then raised its snout to catch another scent. Just a few steps away, the Cook held her breath, her heart hammering. The beast sniffed the air, slobber dangling from its mouth, and it was then she realised it was not alone. Two more pairs of eyes flashed in the mist beyond, then a further three beyond that. They loped forward to join the leader, sniffing the ground as a pack, moving slowly, steadily towards the bushes where the Cook crouched.

At last, when she saw there was no way to hide, she ran - bolting from her shelter with all the speed she could muster. The hounds were instantly at her back, their barks so deep and menacing they rattled the bones in her beating chest. In moments, one of them closed the distance and lunged, clawing the Cook's hips and bringing her down with a strangled scream. She wrestled with it for a moment. One of its immense paws ripped across her face and she cried out in pain. With a burst of primal strength, she somehow raised her knee and kicked it off. She rolled onto her feet, but the dogs had already formed up around her - a snarling circle of killers, yellow teeth bared, eyes devoid of mercy.

"Back, my beauties. Hold!"

It was a powerful voice. Strong and deep enough to catch the attention of the hounds, breaking their primal focus, distracting them from the

imminent kill. The Cook, her face bloodied, felt a surge of grateful relief...but any fleeting hope of rescue faded the moment she saw the man who emerged from the mist. He was of a size to match the voice that preceded him, tall, thick and lumbering. His face was covered in sacking with holes cut out for the eyes and mouth. He was bare-chested, muscular, and heavily marked with scar tissue. He had suffered more scratches and bites than she could count. What had they done to his face? She prayed never to find out.

“What have we here, girls?” said the man, addressing his dogs. Through the sack holes, hard eyes stared at her. “Caught me a sweet treat, have you?” He took a knee and unshouldered a large, heavy-looking leather bag, letting it crash to the ground with a metallic thud. The Cook’s heart sank as he unlaced it and pulled a pair of rusty shackles into the moonlight. With his lumbering stride, he started towards her. “Looks like I’ll be taking back one more bitch than I bargained for.”

†

THE MASON'S TALE

†

The Mason wet his index finger, ran it over the old stone wall of his cell and tasted it. *Not local.* The stone was strange to him. It had taken on a dark, almost black colour, or perhaps had always been so. He had investigated the corners of the cell, the window arch, the door mounting and - despite the strange, distorted shapes and sizes of the stones used - none of these places showed any immediate weakness to his expert eye. He would keep looking.

There was a hammering on the door to his cell. He turned to face it, fists clenched, chest pushed out, unafraid. Next came the jangling of keys, the clank of a heavy lock, the screech of an iron bolt and finally the creak of the door as it swung open. The stink of the jailer wafted in, his fat form blocking the doorway. He was a repulsive man in both mood and appearance. A patch of cloth had been sewn into his skull, covering the cavity of his missing eye - likely lost to one of his foul creatures who grew tired of the lash, or indeed a prisoner who had taken similar exception to his penchant for cruelty. His one good eye held an unblinking, inhuman intensity, conveying all his perverse hungers to whomever it rested upon. At this instant, it was the Mason who had this unfortunate pleasure.

“Out,” the jailer said.

The Mason thought, just for a moment, of rushing him. His captor was a giant of a man, but could he handle himself? The Mason had never seen him tested. The jailer smiled, as if sensing the notion, and two armed guards stepped into view behind the old turnkey.

“It’s your turn, big boy.” He said with a mocking lilt. “Out.”

The Mason stepped out of his cell, eyeing his captors coldly. His hands were promptly bound behind his back, his head covered with sacking. A severe beating followed, but the Mason’s hefty frame took the damage. Inside the sack he clenched his teeth, swallowing any

urge to cry out. Soon enough he felt himself being dragged away.

*

“What trade you got?”

The words were spoken quickly but came from a slow brain. They were slurred, clumsy, in need of a moment to understand. The man’s voice had a rasping edge from too much tongue. Steady beats of scraped metal accompanied the question – it sounded like the sharpening of a blade. The Mason was flat on his back, strapped to a table or platform. His hands, neck, and feet were bound tight with leather straps. At least it was warmer than his cell, with a fire or stove burning somewhere nearby. The hood still covered his head, and underneath all was darkness.

“Mason.”

“Ah...no. Body of a champion. Some warrior from the pits, are you?” The Mason did not answer. There was more scraping of blades, and now the squeaking of some hinged device. The Mason’s shroud was ripped away, and a man leaned over him, his own face covered by a black hood. Crude holes had been cut out for the eyes and mouth – through them, the man’s eyes danced with a strange eagerness. He wore an apron stained with blood.

“Oh...you must answer. You see...” The torturer thrust some kind of sharp rod into the Mason’s side. He gasped. The rod passed under one of his ribs; he could feel the blood oozing out from its entry. The man shifted his weight and applied downward pressure, forcing the rod to jerk back out, up and over the next rib, as if he was stitching a piece of cloth. He released the rod and left it in place. The Mason gritted his teeth, pain surging then at last fading, leaving only horrific discomfort and the sensation of trickling blood. With every short breath the Mason drew in the rod pulled his ribs apart. This man knew his craft.

“There...you see. Answer?” said the torturer.

“Mason.”

“Hmm. Perhaps so.” The man stepped away from the table and the Mason lost sight of him. He could hear the torturer moving to the other side of the room, his steps slow and shambling. He rattled something metallic, then shuffled back to the table and leaned over the Mason.

“These...” the man brought his hand into the Mason’s eyeline. “These, iron.” Between his thumb and index finger he held a small irregular sphere of blackened iron. “Metal stones. They go on stove. Little while. Then where? Hm? The eyes? Ear? Hm? The cock? My choice. Answer?”

The Mason turned his head to one side, looking away. He would give him no such satisfaction.

“Cock first then,” said the man. He shuffled off to the other side of the chamber. The sound of the pellets hitting the bottom of some metal pan filled the room, accompanied by the crackle of coals being stoked, a surge of heat.

“Little while,” said the torturer in a strangely gentle tone, returning to the table with another metal rod, sharp-tipped. He was sure to always move the implement in front of the Mason’s face before each round of pain began. “You build walls. Village walls?”

The Mason closed his eyes, braced himself. A searing pain lanced up his arm, and he knew the torturer had pushed the new rod into his wrist. After a struggle to force it between the thick muscle and bone of his forearm, a disgusting pop announced its exit on the other side. With all his might, the Mason resisted crying out. His mind searched frantically for something to fortify him against the pain. The image of a stone block, heavy and well-made, came to him. He focused on it, three simple words repeating in his head.

Strong as stone. Strong as stone.

“Take down walls, too, hmm? Walls like us?” the torturer blathered, gesturing to the ceiling of the chamber with a rusty blade. He leant over the Mason to listen for an answer. The Mason didn’t offer one.

“More then,” said the torturer. With one arm he braced the Mason’s head against his chest, and with the other brought his rusty cleaver down to press against the Mason’s skull. Blood beaded along the blade. He began a slow cut, starting at the left ear, pulled it across the brow before turning to continue the incision down the side of the Mason’s face, past his eye. The stonecutter felt blood running down his face, the blade juddering as it scraped against his skull. He trembled, sucking in air, close to the edge.

The door burst open and the ripe stench of the jailer flooded the chamber. The torturer straightened with a grumble of disappointment.

“This one goes back to his cell. Reset the table,” the jailer barked. The Mason turned to see him lick his lips, his voice quaking with excitement, “They just brought a woman in.”

“Ah,” said the torturer with pert glee. He made to walk from the table, then hesitated, turning back to lean over the Mason once again. He stroked him on the cheek with the wet cleaver, smearing the Mason’s lips with his own blood. “Stones tomorrow then, champion. Little while.”

The Tanner's Tale

†

A knocking at the door woke the Tanner from a sound slumber. A sensation of alarm passed through her. She sat up in her straw bed and swivelled her feet to the floor. The knocking came again, insistent. By what little light shone through the cracks in her window shutters, she could tell dawn was approaching. Who would be calling so early? She pulled a woollen blanket around herself and walked barefoot to the door. After another round of knocking, she unblocked the threshold.

A nobleman stood before her. He wore a thick fur coat and a velvet cap. A thin sword hung at his hip. He was dark-featured and handsome for his age, in a weathered sort of way. His eyes passed over her, and he smiled.

“You were...sleeping?” he said. The Tanner detected a hint of some unusual accent.

“You were knocking?” she replied.

He threw back his head and laughed. “Good. Yes, very good. Now...” he threw a glance over his shoulder, then lowered his voice to a husky whisper, dark eyes twinkling. “I have work for you.” He held up a small sack in one hand, made a grunt of affirmation then stepped forward as if to go inside. The Tanner stopped him with a raised hand.

“Can it not wait until dawn?” she asked pointedly. The nobleman pursed his lips and sucked in air, shaking his head. He raised a leather purse in his other hand, jingling it to portray its worth. His smile returned, and his eyebrows raised suggestively. The Tanner hesitated, then stepped back to let him through.

“Good,” he purred. “Very good.”

The commission was simple enough, and in truth the price offered for it was a little high. The Tanner hadn't argued and felt no guilt for allowing a rich man to pay a rich man's price. Binding a few stones to a ring with leather tassels? Not a problem for a woman of her skill. He hadn't stayed for long and had left the sack containing the stones unopened on her workbench.

For the rest of the day, the Tanner had busied herself with her usual leatherworking tasks. It was not until that evening that she found some time to put towards the nobleman's request. Casually she turned up the sack, tipping the contents onto her table. As she did so a terrible pain shot through her temples. She winced and cradled her head. In a moment it passed. She took some water, dismissing the pain as the product of her interrupted sleep – the price she'd have to pay for this lucrative bit of extra work.

Before her on the table were five small stones, each no larger than a coin and not of any immediate value as far as she could see. Alongside them sat a larger stone ring, about the size of a bracelet. The ring bore a faded inscription running along its outer circumference. Studying the characters, the Tanner saw they were of a sort she couldn't read, and she noticed the same language was inscribed on the smaller stones too. The Tanner stood, drank deep from her water jug, and then took down a fine piece of leather from the selection hanging above her workbench. She assembled her blades, picks, and oils, and began crafting the tassels by which to bind these strange runes together.

After many hours of work, it was finally time for the Tanner to sleep once more, and much-needed it was too. But the night did not bring the comfort and rest she craved. Instead, she found herself beset by the restless visions of a disturbing dream:

The Tanner was walking, barefoot and alone. Her feet were numb from the cold stone floor beneath. On all sides, long, hanging skins of creatures she didn't recognise blocked her way. She pushed one aside, stepping forward only

to find another beyond it, and another beyond that. Something was behind her now – she heard its scurry, its wheezing breaths, its gurgling snarl. She ran, her way forward masked by each flap of leather until she pushed it aside. Her panic grew, and now she was unable to quicken her pace. At last she reached a stone wall, a dead end, ice cold to the touch. Turning, she pressed her back to it, breathless. Her pursuer was pushing through the skins towards her, disturbing each in turn, gasping, slopping towards her with wet, frantic steps. Finally, she saw it. It was a hideous, impossible creature – a skinless, furless amalgam stitched together from butchered pieces of other animals, somehow animated into grotesque existence. It was all exposed muscle, shards of bone, and dangling sinew. Its head was covered with dead eyes and mouths within mouths; here sharp, elongated teeth; here forked tongues; here dripping sacs of venom. At the sight of it, the Tanner was paralysed. It rose up onto its hind legs, released a deafening shriek and plunged towards her...

The Tanner screamed and awoke. She was outside, her body cold, standing on a familiar path at the perimeter of the village. It was night, dark and moonless. She wore only her bedclothes. In the palm of her hand she held one of the stones, throbbing and warm. She looked about her in a daze. Not another soul stirred. A wind blew through the village and the Tanner shivered. She wracked her brain for a memory of how she came to be here but could find none. All she could do was hurry quickly home to bed.

*

The Tanner rose late the next day, unrefreshed and confused about the events of the previous night. After bathing and breaking fast she set about her craft – the one thing in which she could trust. The tassels had taken their oils nicely, dried and softened, and she was ready to begin attaching the first of the stones. She took them up and examined them closely. The shooting pain returned to her temples and a vision of the creature from the dream appeared for half a moment. She dropped the stones and pushed back from her chair. It passed. She came to her senses and retook her place at the workbench.

The remainder of the day continued without incident, and as evening drew in she had attached a delicate leather strap to each of the stones. She went to bed uneasy, desperate for a restful night. She dreamed again.

A small, stone chamber – round, and without windows or doors. In the centre was a simple wooden table, a woman seated at it. A black veil covered her face. She was motionless. The sound of her slow breathing filled the room, louder than could possibly be real. Without willing it, the Tanner approached the table and sat across from her. Fearful yet compelled, she reached out a hand, took hold of the woman’s veil and pulled it aside. An impossibly haggard face was revealed, black eyes staring at the Tanner through long, straggly hair. The woman’s hands appeared from beneath her tattered gown, clasped together. She whispered a few beats of harsh, incomprehensible words, then opened her hands to let a collection of runes fall to the table. Looking at them, the woman began to laugh – not warmly, but with a foul knowing, a mocking glee that gnawed at the Tanner’s very soul. She pushed back from the table and awoke.

Now she was standing at the edge of a woodland. Ahead of her, a barren landscape rolled out into thick, shifting mists. It was night, and again she had no memory of her journey to this place. She had wandered much farther from the village than before. She shivered violently, this time glad of the warmth the stones gave her as she clutched them in her hands, five of them now, tassels and all. She found her bearings and hurried back to the village as fast as her legs could carry her.

*

The Tanner rose early the next afternoon, exhausted. The night’s events came back to her and she sat worrying for some time. She resolved to seek out her friend, the Cook, and after dressing made her

way to her kitchen. The Tanner lingered outside the Cook's door for some time, working up the courage to knock. The smell of something cooking emanated from within, but the Tanner found she could take no pleasure from it. What would she say, how could she explain what had happened? Had it happened at all? She needed to rest. She raised her hand to knock, and at that moment the door was opened from within.

*

Although she had startled the Cook, the woman had been kind. She had seemed busy and, seeing a basket of skins beside the door, the Tanner had disguised the reason for her visit as a trip to collect them. She couldn't bring herself to say what had happened. She had, at least, suggested the two should meet the following day, and this brought the Tanner a measure of comfort.

That afternoon she finished the work, binding the stones to the ring and adding some decorative pieces to complete the effect. She would be glad when the nobleman came to collect it and this strange relic was out of her life. She went to bed feverishly muttering this wish over and over until, at length, she drifted off.

The Tanner stood on a windswept bell tower. In her hands was the relic; its stone ring, tassels, and the stones throbbing, warm to the touch. Above her, a huge bronze bell suspended by wooden beams trembled. A man had been hung from the clapper, his face covered with sacking, his body swaying like a ragdoll in the wind. The Tanner walked slowly to the edge of the tower, leaning out over a low, crenelated wall to look down from the dizzying height over the barren, blackened landscape of rolling mists below. Suddenly she sensed a presence, a darkness. A cold evil was moving behind her. She was not alone in this tower. She turned, seeing it only for a moment. A hooded figure – and where its face ought to have been there was only a dark abyss. It hissed an angry curse and flew towards her now in a flash, gliding well clear of the ground, robes fluttering in the wind. It raised an ornate

staff and let fly a surge of dark, crackling energy. The bolt struck the relic from the Tanner's grasp and sent her flying across the tower, out over the battlements and plummeting towards the cold, hard stones of the courtyard below...

The Tanner opened her eyes. She remembered the dream, and for a moment felt a deep relief that it was over. But something was wrong. She lay not on her bed of straw but on a stone floor, cold as ice. She sat up, taking in the small, dark room. The stone walls were damp, and there was a slow drip of foul-smelling water from above. A single, barred window permitted a solitary streak of pale moonlight. She immediately made to try the door. There was no handle. She tried to force it, but it wouldn't budge. Fear took a hold of her. What was this dismal place? She hammered on the door and called for help - in time her call becoming a desperate scream, in time a hopeless wail, in time a whimper, carried through the darkness of the castle in vain.

The Hunter's Tale

†

Two hours sharpening the arrowheads; a three-hour trek from the village to get here; two more lying motionless in the hide and still the Hunter's focus was razor sharp. She had taken up position in a patch of brush, her lie concealed from all sides by thick, tough stems which even the foulest winds would not dislodge. She was hidden – her tunic, trousers, boots, all perfectly chosen to blend with the terrain of the hillside on which she was perched, up where the sweet grasslands of the valley gave way to more rocky terrain and patches of giant furs.

The Hunter had heard it said that people were creatures of habit – crawling to the same inn every night, ordering the same ale, talking to the same friends on the same subjects before staggering home to the same straw bed. True enough, perhaps. And if it was, the same could be said for the creatures of the wild – they too had their habits. This was the spot where, any moment now, the deer would pass through, just as they always did. It might be an hour earlier or an hour later, but they would come. And so it went for the Hunter – if she wasn't stalking the dense forests for mile after fruitless mile, she was lying in wait, prone and sodden in the wet grass.

This evening it was the latter. The sky had been laden with low, moody clouds since daybreak, and finally they gave out. Rain began to patter on her leathers. The Hunter smiled, holding still as a droplet trickled down her face, tasting its bitterness as it crossed her lips. As she scanned the hillside, she reflected on how she relished every moment of her work. And why shouldn't she? She had earned the right to be here. Not only through her years of mastering bow and blade, but for her skill and cunning at tracking, observing, and learning the movements of her prey. Soon they would come, and that sense of satisfaction she had so often felt, the immense pride at the successful culmination of a day's work, would be hers once more.

A pair of ears appeared over the crest of the hill. The Hunter shifted slowly onto all fours. Here they were. At least six deer came skipping over the crest, their sprightly trot a delight to behold. The rain intensified. The Hunter pushed herself up to a kneel, then slowly raised her bow and nocked an arrow. The deer paused, one of them bending its neck to pull at the grass. Another turned to look behind, calling out. The herd held steady. A third was looking directly at the hide, chewing, unaware of the death that lay within. The Hunter cocked her head, closed one eye, and took aim. The Tanner would soon have her skins, the Butcher his meat, and the Hunter herself another coin in the purse.

Without warning, an intruder appeared in her vision. It was a raven flying in at speed to land between the Hunter and her prey. She paused. The bird hopped twice, looked about, pecked hard at the ground, swallowed something. The Hunter held the bow drawn, aim steady, patient. *Just don't make a sound*, she willed. The raven hopped again and turned to look at her. It tilted its head, then cawed loudly and took flight. In unison, the deer bolted too; the Hunter let fly with a curse. She sprang from the hide, sprinting towards the herd, stashing her bow onto her back and drawing a blade without so much as a momentary dip in speed. She had hit one of the smaller deer, but it wasn't a clean shot. Now she had to finish the job.

The Hunter saw that the deer had taken the arrow to one of her hind legs. The others had outpaced it and fled, but this one was still in sight. She gave chase as the injured quarry limped on. It was weaving as it went, perhaps trying to dislodge the arrow that was laming it, perhaps out of some deep instinct to throw a predator off its tail. The predator was closing. The deer veered wildly and scrambled for higher ground. It rounded a bluff in the rocky hillside and passed out of sight. As the Hunter reached the same corner, she was amazed to see no sign of it. She stopped dead and stood motionless in the rain, waiting for a sound, a sign of movement.

In a moment, the faint sound of hooves reached her, echoing, distant.

She followed it to a small opening in the hillside, beneath a large overhang of rock which jutted up like the jagged tooth of some great beast, twisted and worn by the winds of many ages. The deer had ventured in. It's last mistake. With a grin the Hunter followed.

The tunnel led underground before opening out considerably. The evening light guided the Hunter at first, but soon faded. A staff and cape on the tunnel floor caught her eye, along with some bread and an apple, perhaps left by a Shepherd who had recently used this place for shelter. Further on, the Hunter found what she wanted; a trail of fresh blood, confirming the deer had fled this way. Somewhere in this cavern it would have fallen, exhausted or bled out, and there she would take her prize. She pushed deeper inside, the sound of staggering hooves guiding her as the hiss of rainfall faded behind. Soon natural light had been all but swallowed up by the darkness, and she was forced to feel her way through the jagged, damp caverns for a short time. But then, to her surprise, a new light glowed up ahead - the flicker of flame. She reached a wall-mounted torch, burning low. Below that, an assortment of empty barrels and boxes had been piled and were gathering a great deal of dust. Smugglers? she mused. The deer brayed from somewhere up ahead. The Hunter took the torch from the wall and pressed on.

It was not long before the natural rock of the tunnels began to blend with patches of manmade stonework, and the Hunter realised she had left the caverns behind. She was now wandering through a passageway comprised entirely of hewn stone. In time she came upon a chamber, a junction of sorts from which nine other passages branched, each darker than the last. *What is this place?* Beside one of the portals a skeletal form was crouched, propped against the wall, covered in cobwebs and the dust of ages. The Hunter could detect neither sight nor sound of the deer - but she had come too far to abandon the search now. She chose the route straight ahead and followed that passage for some time, before returning to the same chamber. To her amazement, she had gone in a circle. Here was the skeleton once again, the same nine doorways. Next, she took the first passage to the left. Perhaps

an hour later, she found herself once again deposited back at her starting point. The Hunter began to panic. Trusting common sense, she ran back along the passage through which she had first come. Yet three hours later, she arrived exhausted into the room with nine exits for a third time. And so it went for the Hunter - every passage was tried, and none seemed ever to follow the same route twice; winding, narrowing, twisting, always different, yet always leading back to this central room. In time, she fell to the ground, exhausted and thirsty, the injured deer long forgotten. The darkness swallowed her.

*

The Hunter opened her eyes. She could not raise her head. Her life was almost spent. Her mouth was dry, lips cracked. The sound of hooves reached her through the darkness, and the deer stepped slowly into the chamber. It approached and paused beside the Hunter, before dipping its head to lick her face. She managed a smile, and a tear ran down her cheek. Then came other sounds, fast approaching - heavy footsteps and the rattling of chains.

The Smith's Fate

†

The Smith raised his hammer. One more blow would end it. He was exhausted, breathing heavily, sweat running into his eyes, but still he was conscious of the immense strength pulsing in his muscular arm. He brought the hammer down with all his might.

There, another piece of armour finished. He let the tool drop to the floor and leant against his workbench to catch his breath. His eyes moved to the hammer where it now lay, snug in the straw underfoot. For a moment the Smith wished he could do the same. He'd sleep well tonight, that was for sure.

The Smith caressed the palm of his right hand, his hammer hand. It ached from hours of heavy work. Just then a woman pushed her head through the leather flaps of his workshop threshold, interrupting his moment of peace.

"That looks one sturdy breastplate," she said. It was the Fletcher, a good customer. She was a small, strong woman with a weathered face and sparkling eyes. The forge fires made the Smith's workshop a sweltering place to conduct a day's labour. He was well used to it, but the grimace on the Fletcher's face reminder him that others are more used to working in the open air.

"Fashioned to the exact measurements of the fat-arsed watchmen who commissioned it," said the Smith, to which the Fletcher barked a single beat of laughter. "Not my finest work, but a bit of coin in my purse and a bit of food on the table."

"Where's your bastard brother?" asked the Fletcher, pushing her shoulders through and looking about. It was a question the Smith didn't care for. He knew the answer but liked it no better for the knowing.

"Sick," he said. "Fever. Better soon."

“Oh aye?” said the Fletcher, raising an eyebrow. She looked doubtful, and the two exchanged a meaningful look. The Smith had always felt he could conjure an iron stare when he wanted to, and the Fletcher’s face told him he hadn’t lost his touch. “Tell him I want those arrowheads on the morrow. Will you do that?” The Smith nodded, and she withdrew.

The Smith waited until the Fletcher had been gone a few moments, then threw a bucket of water on his fire. He strode out of the workshop as it sizzled and smoked behind him. The streets of the village were humming with people making tracks now the day was done, ready to partake in the usual array of evening activities. It was dusk, and the cool of the evening air was a welcome relief. He felt his body start to relax – then quickly tried to push the sensation away, focusing on the task at hand. The Smith did his best not to draw attention to himself as he took up an axe from the log pile outside his workshop. Steeled with determination, he strode out of the village at pace.

*

When the Smith reached the edge of the woodland he paused to look back at the village. The warm glow of candles lighting cosy wooden rooms beckoned – some ale, a bed, a woman even. But no – now, he had business here. He listened as a faint sound drifted through the night air. It was voices in unity – a droning chant, eerie in the moonlit gloom of the densely packed trees. It was a sound he had been waiting to hear, and a sound he feared, for it confirmed his suspicions about the whereabouts of his brother. He wouldn’t let this stand. He pushed deeper into the woods towards the source of it. Soon the flickering light of a fire became visible through the forest ahead, and with it a sense of movement. Shadows danced before the flames. He gripped his axe a little tighter.

The Smith slowed his pace as he drew near. Beneath the chanting his steps were almost soundless. He concealed himself behind the trunk of an immense fir and peered out at the repulsive scene. This time they had gathered at the ring of stones, he noted. The Smith knew

this place well. The stones had been there long before his time and even before the time of his father. His people had no use for them now, so the perverse ritual he now beheld was all the more disturbing – what power, what ancient knowledge did they possess? There at the centre of them, beside the fire pit, was his brother. Drexel was on his knees, naked from the waist up, with what looked like slaughtered beasts strewn around him. His chest throbbed from a freshly branded mark, so raw and blood-stained it was yet to settle into a discernible shape. On his head sat some strange cap of iron – decent work, surely fashioned by his brother’s own hand. At the edge of the circle a dozen hooded cultists moved in slow procession, raising their voices in the mesmeric, wordless song the Smith has used to locate them.

“Drexel!” the Smith bellowed as he stepped out from his hide, pushing hard past one of the hooded figures and marching into the centre of the stones to stand beside his brother. In an instant the cultists ceased their chant and turned inwards to form a tight circle, their movement strangely uniform. Though their faces were shrouded, the Smith did his best to eye each of them in turn. He raised his axe and brought on his iron stare.

“You’ll take no more from this village, least of all my kin,” he yelled. “Do you hear?” The cultists gave no reply. Instead, in unison, they each took one pace forward. The Smith swallowed, widened his stance, and drew back his axe. He looked about, noticing only now the naked human bodies on the ground beside the fire, slaughtered, streaked with blood and covered in strange markings. Not beasts at all. Sacrifices. He hissed to his brother. “Come. Let’s go. Fight beside me now and be free of this madness.” Turning to look down at Drexel he was met with inhuman eyes, and a sick, intoxicated smile.

“Join us, brother,” Drexel slurred. Blood spilled from his mouth as he spoke. He laughed at this and wiped it away. The cultists now lurched forward, closing the circle at speed, drawing clubs and coshes from beneath their robes. The Smith swung his axe and found a target, cleaving one of them near clean in half. But a moment later they were

on him. Overpowered, their weapons rained down, and he was beaten hard into the ground.

When it was done, he looked up through swollen eyes to see his brother standing over him. “My older brother, but still you know less than a new-born babe. No matter. The Priestess will show you the true meaning of might,” said Drexel. There was venom in the words. He raised a hand and called out to his brethren. “We take him with us!” This brought an excited murmur from the cultists. They hoisted the Smith onto their shoulders and took up their chanting once again, forming up into a column before beginning a slow procession into the night. As the Smith lost consciousness, the last sound to reach his ears were the chilling whispers that ushered from Drexel’s bloodied lips.

“Perhaps a few dozen years in darkness might help you see the light, dear brother.”

THE TAILOR'S TALE

†

The Tailor leaned forward in her chair, stooping low over her workbench, dextrous fingers unwavering as she deftly manoeuvred needle and thread into tiny, neat stitches. She had risen early, bathed, and having thrown open the shutters of her window was now settled into a spell of focused needlework in the brilliant morning light.

The door to her rooms burst open. Startled, she put the needle clean through the flesh of her thumb and cried out.

“Shush! Foolish girl.” It was the voice of her uncle - an unusual looking man with a carefully cultivated moustache and dark, handsome features. His slender rapier was drawn. He looked about, agitated.

“I am alone, uncle,” said the Tailor, irritation in her voice. “You startled me - look, I’m bleeding.” She wrapped her wound in a scrap of cloth as she scolded him. Her uncle shot it a glance and tutted.

“You’ll be fine.” He was peering nervously out of the doorway now, looking this way and that. Finally satisfied, he shut the door carefully, sheathed his blade and leant against the frame with a heavy sigh. The Tailor looked him up and down with disgust. He had brought the stench of stale wine and something fouler still into her airy workshop.

“Look at you. A nobleman indeed. You haven’t slept again? Where *do* you disappear to at night?”

He raised his hand to dismiss the question, catching his breath. Straightening, he took off his hat and tossed it over to where she sat. A fine creation of soft, thick velvet, it had seen better days. She recoiled at the smell of the thing as it landed on her lap. “Just a small tear to mend,” he said, removing his luxurious fur coat and hanging it on a peg beside the threshold. It was spattered with mud. He ran his hands absently through his thick, shoulder-length black hair then began to unlace his undershirt. The Tailor was about to look away

when she noticed the blood on it.

“This one needs washing, too,” said her uncle. He noticed her reaction and smiled. “Don’t worry, it isn’t mine.” She looked him straight in the eye, serious. He darkened, walked over to her, and held out the shirt expectantly, repeating his command. “Wash.” The Tailor now saw scratches on his arm and chest, and what looked like a series of burns on his abdomen. She opened her mouth to speak...only for her uncle to clamp hold of her jaw and lean in uncomfortably close. His breath was rotten. “Not a word, girl. See to your work.” Roughly, he released his grip on her. He staggered across the room and flopped onto a pile of fabrics in the corner, spread eagled, head back, muttering incoherently.

The Tailor fought back a tear and began to do as she was bidden. The bright morning sun seemed paler to her now, thinner. Soon the man was snoring loudly, and she let herself cry, muffling the sound with the fabric of her headdress. This was the last time, she vowed, looking across at the collapsed form of her uncle. Despite her anguish, a plan was forming.

*

Her uncle woke, dressed and departed as the sun began to set. He said nothing, but nodded his approval at the repairs the Tailor had carried out. He did in fact look well, or at least his clothing did. His tired, distant eyes and weathered face told a different story. Before departing he drank a jug of water in a single draw, wiped his mouth and slammed it down on the table. Then he opened the door, checked the way was clear, and was gone. The Tailor sprang into immediate action. From a drawer she produced a cloak she had modified with an extra-large hood – such that she might entirely conceal her face should she wish. She buckled a dagger onto her hip, pulled the cloak over her shoulders and slipped out after him.

The village streets were busy with people ending their day’s work, others venturing out in search of the evening’s entertainment. She

caught sight of her uncle as he headed out of the village. Some way behind, she followed. She passed the Fletcher, who shot her a look of recognition. Tugging her hood down a little farther, the Tailor quickened her pace. No-one must see her.

Further on, as she neared the edge of the village, she paused and stepped into the shadows of a market stall as her friend the Smith emerged from his workshop. He seemed agitated, his body taut as he scooped up an axe and made for the woodland. The Tailor cursed, for this distraction meant she had lost sight of her uncle. She ran in the direction she had last seen him, finally catching sight of his distinctive hat as it disappeared over a crest, some way off along a wide path which led away from the village and down into the valley beyond. She pursued him, careful always to remain a good distance behind.

For hours she shadowed her uncle. Her caution proved wise, as he paused regularly to check over his shoulder or pass water. When he did, the Tailor hid as best she could, darting from tree to tree, stooping behind hedges, keeping out of the moonlight. She tracked him for mile after mile, down through the valley, high over the windswept hills and on through twisted, eerie woodland. It seemed like her pursuit would never end.

At length he took upon a hard, black, rocky path that led across a misty, barren landscape. It was there that she first saw it, rising into the night like the claw of some grotesque beast. The castle. Built upon a base of rock, it comprised a staggering array of walls and towers, their size and number beyond reckoning. It was broader than any village she had known, and so tall it almost blotted out the light of the moon itself. As her uncle drew close to the castle gatehouse, the Tailor concealed herself behind a cluster of rocks just a few paces away. It was unusually cold here she noticed, and the stillness in the air unnerved her. A bell tolled from some high tower and the chattering of unseen creatures drifted through the air. The Tailor began to wish she had not come. She wondered what foul habits could lead her uncle

to such a place.

Two figures emerged from the gatehouse to block the nobleman's path. The Tailor shifted to better see them: One wore a helm and carried a blade, while the other had long, greasy hair, a spiked club resting in his hand. The men looked the rotten sort, weary and unkempt. A little like her uncle, truthfully - but with worse Tailoring. A conversation ensued. Her uncle spoke in long, flowing beats, gesturing with his hands. His speech was starkly punctuated by the primitive drawl of the guards. He opened his coat, and the men raised their weapons, relaxing a moment later when he produced a leather pouch. The men exchanged a look, took it, then waved him through. The Tailor stood a little taller, straining to keep track of her uncle as he disappeared through the gate. One of the guards watched the nobleman as he went, but the other turned to look in the direction from which he had come. It was this one who spotted her. He tilted his head and grunted, attracting the attention of the second guard. The Tailor ducked behind the rocks in the same instant, her heart pounding. Had they really seen her? She waited a few moments, listening. There was only silence. But when she next looked out, one of them was approaching, just a few paces from her hide. She edged back against the rocks and reached for her dagger, readying herself. She would do whatever she had to...

A hand clamped down on her shoulder from the other side. The Tailor drew in a sharp breath.

"What have we here?" It was the long-haired guard, leaning in close with a foul grin - his black, rotten teeth unable to contain his saliva. She pulled back her dagger to strike. But then another hand caught her wrist from behind - the second guard.

"Aye. A pretty thing."

The Tailor was surrounded. In an instant she was disarmed and pinned against the rocks. She managed to raise a knee, connecting hard with the groin of the greasy man who rolled to the floor in agony. The other laughed, drawing his blade and pressing it to her neck. She froze.

From his helm, beady eyes looked her up and down.

“A feisty one, eh? Good. We’ve got a special chamber for the likes of you.”

She saw him raise the hilt of his sword and bring it down towards her. There was no way to avoid it. The blow struck her firmly on the cheek, and with a ringing in her ears she fell to the ground as all faded to black.

THE ABBOT'S TALE

†

The Abbot was paralysed - feet rooted to the spot, eyes darting from side to side as panic crept over him. *Which books? Which books to pack?*

Ahead of him the shelves of the abbey library rose high and wide, a dense tapestry of innumerate, flaking spines - centuries of priceless, crumbling knowledge. To the Abbot, an immediate choice was not forthcoming and yet, a selection had to be made. He estimated it would be three days' walk from the mellow valley in which the abbey was situated before he would reach the village on the far side of the vale. That meant two nights at camp in the intervening wilderness and some nine stops for prayer. It was plenty of time to pore over a good few texts if he took them along, texts which might aid him in his mission, but with so many fine choices he was hard pressed to choose. He stroked his beard, the paralysis softening at least in body. *Rengorn's Theories on the Minds of Men? Dryunt's Strength of Will?* So many fine choices. He was aware of his own slowness, which took on the form of some pressure, some need to hurry. This only caused his mind to move all the more slowly. A sound passed his lips - not a word, but a trembling utterance expressing only his exasperation. It was met with another voice, this one smooth and gentle,

"Perhaps I can assist, your grace?"

It was Samuel. He had entered soundlessly, and the presence of a fellow brother now seemed to stimulate the Abbot into more comprehensible speech.

"Ah, Samuel. Yes, there you are. Here now, help me to choose, will you? T-two should suffice. Yes, three I should think. Four, no more. Forgive my slowness."

"Your grace," Samuel bowed slightly and stepped forward, selecting three extremely valuable tomes with quick, elegant hands. "Fret not,

for this has always been your way. It is a credit to you.” He deftly stacked the books and offered them to the Abbot on outstretched hands. “Think of your life before you took the cloth, your grace, of the ridicule you faced at the hands of more boisterous, energetic souls. Well, now we know, do we not?” He gestured with his eyes to the pile of books, offering his Abbot a wide smile. “It was wisdom all along.”

The Abbot chuckled. “Ah yes, well. This library is indeed my finest achievement, by the grace of God.”

“By the grace of God,” Samuel repeated, lowering his eyes.

“And how I do dread the leaving of it, even for this short time.” The Abbot’s brow furrowed for a moment. “But, if it is the will of the almighty that I should lend my learning to the strange occurrences by which the village watchmen appear lately to have been so very troubled, then...His will be done.”

“His will be done.” The holy men bowed to each other.

Samuel helped the Abbot load the books and several other items into a long bag of rough spun cloth. Cut to hang over the shoulders of the wearer, like the saddlebags of a mule, it was embroidered with the symbol of their order – a simple, narrow cross. The Abbot hefted the bag, staggering under the weight of its contents. Samuel spoke again.

“A large loaf, six apples, and a skin of water, your grace. Heavy, it is true, but sure to lighten with every meal. May the Lord go with you.”

“And with you,” the Abbot wheezed.

With that, Samuel bowed and withdrew, gliding out of the room as softly as he had come. The Abbot bent to tighten the buckle of his sandals, rose, and lifted the bag to his shoulders once again with a groan. He threw open the door and was greeted by the soft morning sunshine and the sweet aroma of the meadow in which the ancient monastery nestled. The distant sound of his brothers working the hop fields drifted in, tools striking soil, comforting and familiar. He

rubbed his hands together and muttered thanks for the glory of this sensation. Taking a staff and a light cloak from the hook beside the doorframe, he began his journey.

*

In a few miles, the Abbot had passed over the western side of the vale, where the sweet grasslands gave way to more rocky terrain and patches of giant firs. He paused to look back down the long, sweeping valley, his eye following its line out across the meadow to the majestic stone form of the abbey. For a moment he drank in the scene, enchanted by its splendour. But then his mind drifted to the serious nature of his mission. The hope that his letter had reached the Bishop had not subsided. Indeed, in light of the occurrences to which he had been called to bear witness, his mind had not sat easy for many days. As he mused, a figure caught his eye some distance below. It was the Miller, his distinctively gaunt form and stooping gait evident even from this far off. The man was approaching the abbey – on what business the Abbot did not know. From up here he could also see his brothers, their now tiny, swaying figures toiling with hoe and rake, while others walked silently here and there. The Abbot sighed and went on his way. He remained in muted spirits for much of the day, stopping only for prayer, sustenance, and the relief of his bowels.

As the day drew on, a bitter wind picked up. It grew fierce, buffeting the Abbot into sharp, faltering steps. On tired legs, he became increasingly unsteady under the weight of his pack. He raised a hand to shield his eyes from the sting of the gale and peered at the setting sun. As he watched, thick grey clouds blew in, swirling to conceal it, as if in these final stages of its long descent they had chosen to spring their trap. He grumbled at the weakness of his aching body and resolved to make camp.

A little further on, the Abbot pitched himself beneath a large overhang of rock which jutted up from the hillside like the jagged tooth of some great beast, twisted and worn by the winds of many ages. With the correct positioning of his cloak and staff its tip would pass as a shelter

of sorts. He struck a small fire and slide some of the books from his pack. These were books of great worth - a tome on forbidden rituals, a crumbling spellbook of unknown origin, and an illustrated guide to the torture of the human body. He replaced these and withdrew something more useful to the trouble at hand, and then sat reading by the flickering firelight, warming his tired feet against the cold, steadily encroaching night.

*

A sound, and the Abbot awoke, fearful, his heart pounding in his chest. He had fallen asleep and for the briefest of moments his surroundings seemed utterly unfamiliar. He sat up. His cloak and staff lay on the ground next to the dying fire, a foul wind whipping across the derelict shelter. He glanced skyward and raised an eyebrow - it was a starless night with an unseasonal heaviness to the air. Heavy raindrops began to fall, and the roll of distant thunder suggested it would soon worsen. Was that the sound that had woken him? Grumbling, the Abbot got to his feet and began gathering together his already sodden possessions. As the rain grew quicker, he knew he would need new shelter. He plunged the tip of his staff into the embers of the fire, in a moment imbuing it with an incandescent smoulder. Guided by what little light this gave, he retreated further under the overhang of rock, stooping as he went, pressing deeper and finally stepping through a small opening at its base. Inside, a sloping path lead underground. Within, the passage opened into a large cave and the howl of the wind soon faded behind him. For a moment he was glad of it.

Then a familiar sound met his ears, and he knew it was not the thunder that had woken him. This time it was clearer: a hiss, a flutter of wings, a snarl. The Abbot waved his staff this way and that, throwing light upon the cave walls but finding nothing. He paused to listen, his heart pounding. The noise came again - a whisper, a muffled scream. It was all and none of these things. Frightened, he turned back and made for the opening. A hooded figure blocked the way

“Who’s there?” the Abbot’s voice was charged with fear.

The figure gave no reply, but slowly extended its arms to form the shape of a cross. To the Abbot's horror, it began to float through the air towards him. A deafening roar of thunder crashed overhead, and a flash of lightning momentarily illuminated the cave, offering a glimpse of the figure's face.

"Samuel? Even now you cannot see it? Your foolishness never ceases to please me. Take him." It was said with a smooth gentle voice, its face changing as it spoke - the image of Samuel being wiped away, replaced by the Abbot's own image.

The figure stopped above him, levitating. As the last gleam of light dwindled on his staff, the Abbot thought he saw it smile.

"Take him," it said with a smooth, gentle voice.

The Abbot was paralysed - feet rooted to the spot, eyes darting from side to side as his panic mounted. His assailants were mere shadows, beings of darkness that swirled around him. A darkness different to that of the cave. A sack descended over his face, and something struck him in the stomach. With a grunt he lurched forward and vomited. He felt himself being dragged, deeper and deeper into the cave, his possessions stripped away as he went. But not the books. The Abbot realised he was clutching them tight to his chest, still in their monastery bag.

No...you shall not...

Another heavy blow landed, this time to his head. As he faded from consciousness, he felt his grip loosen. The last thing he heard were the words of the being he once knew as Samuel.

"Take the books to the Keeper of the Hoard. I will supply more in time. For him, seek out your deepest cell."

The Miller's Fate



She was the most beautiful woman the Miller had ever seen. Who she was or where she came from he hadn't thought to ask. Within moments of their chance meeting at the inn, their conversation had fallen into a deep, syncopated flow, lurching from one delightful topic to the next. She knew her grains, this lady, and they talked of flour, bread, mills and baking until they had drunk their weight in wine. Her voice still rung in his ears, a sweet chime so harmonious that every word had seemed like effortless poetry. She had taken him to bed, and things had become a little hazy after that.

The Miller awoke to find it already after noon. Glass bottles crashed to the floor as he sat up in his straw bed and threw off the woollens with a groan. He found he was still fully dressed. His head was throbbing, and his body ached all over. Looking about the room, he saw there was no trace of her - only the sweet memories with which she had left him. Those were more than enough. He smiled and sat for a moment reliving the previous night's events. Slowly, he rose, staggered out of his room and down the wooden steps to the sunlit yard. Some chickens clucked and scattered as he plunged his head into a trough of water. It helped. He collected a pail and went about his daily chores, a spring in his step.

Opening the doors to the grain store, the Miller froze. He dropped the pail and stood open-mouthed for a moment. He had to step inside to believe what he was seeing. The grain store was empty. The entire autumn harvest was gone. Missing. Stolen. He fell to his knees, a whimper escaping his lips.

"A fool. What a fool I am."

The Miller knew he'd hang for this, or at least rot in stocks for the rest of his miserable days. No. She would hang. He'd find her, that rotten thief. How could he have been so stupid? But no, first he had

to find more grain, put something in the store before anyone noticed. His quick mind hatched a plan as he paced the yard. He settled on the abbey - they always had a reserve. The question was, could they spare it? Would they spare it? He and the Abbot had often reached agreement. Yes, it was his best chance. He set off immediately, making sure to shut the grain store to at least delay the discovery of his negligence.

Later that day the Miller reached the outlying monastery fields and paused for breath. Their swaying stalks seemed to mock his predicament - row upon row of tall, grain-yielding plants, ripe for harvesting. He wondered how many people would die, starving because of his stupidity. As the gravity of his failure returned to him, he looked skyward in despair, running his hands through his hair. Something caught his eye. A lone figure walking along a distant hillside, up where the sweet grasslands gave way to more rocky terrain and patches of giant firs. The figure carried a staff. It seemed to have been watching him, but in a moment turned and went on its way. The Miller watched it disappear, his mind returning to his plight. Soon he stood before the abbey doors, rapping on them.

*

“A curse on you, Samuel,” hissed the Miller as the abbey doors slammed shut behind him. “Refuse me, will you? Pray for me?” He raised his voice to a shout, “The Abbot will not stand for this! Pray for me when I’m swinging from a rope!” He kicked the ground, throwing up a cloud of dust. Then he hammered on the doors once again. There was no further reply.

“You must be the Miller?” the voice was low and gravelly. The Miller turned to see two armoured watchmen atop a large wooden gaol-cart pulled by a fine black mare. He hadn’t heard their arrival, so intense had been his appeal to Samuel inside the abbey. One of the men wore a captain’s uniform, but the Miller didn’t recognise his face. The other he did recognise - a portly fellow sporting a fine new breastplate, a man he’d often see devouring pies at the inn.

“I must be,” the Miller replied. “Who asks?”

“Come to beg forgiveness?” the captain smiled. “It’s too late for that. There’s a village of hungry people wanting answers. Angry people.”

“They won’t go hungry for days,” the Miller began to plead. “I know the abbey will help us if only we can reach the Ab-“

“Enough!” the stout captain raised a hand. “Miller, I hereby charge you with the loss of a winter’s yield, the penalty for which is death.” He gestured to his subordinate. “Put him in irons.”

The Miller backed away as the other guard disembarked and approached him, shackles outstretched. For a moment he assessed his chances of escape. A fight with these men was ill-advised. Perhaps he might make his plea in the village. Best to go along for now. He held out his wrists and was duly restrained.

“In the back?” the watchmen asked his captain.

“No. He rides up here with us. I want to keep my eye on him.”

*

Soon the Miller was sitting atop the cart, packed uncomfortably between the two men as they trundled down rutted tracks. It was the wrong direction for the village, but the Miller held his tongue.

“Halt!” the Captain of the Guards announced as they reached a bend in the road, overhung by towering woodland dappled with streaks of sunlight. “Stop here. I’ll take a piss.”

“Aye,” said the other, yanking on the reins and bringing the cart to a halt. The captain disembarked and disappeared into the bushes beside the track. In a moment, his tuneless whistling could be heard along with the sound of his stream. The Miller looked over at the fat watchman beside him. He seemed a dim sort of fellow, the kind to take orders without any independent thought to get in the way. He was staring straight ahead, chewing something, waiting for his next command.

The sound of a blade being drawn caught the attention of both men. It was quickly followed by a wet, throaty, gurgling sound. The Miller and his captor exchanged a frightened look. Then out of the bushes strode the woman the Miller had met at the inn the previous night. There was no sign of the captain. The fat man's eyes bulged.

"Halt!" he said in a shrill voice, all but falling from the cart. He was still fumbling for his blade when the woman's sword ran him threw. Deftly she kicked him off his perch and he slumped dead to the ground. The Miller climbed down, astounded to see her. He approached cautiously, staggering in his shackles, babbling about what he thought had happened. His speech faltered when he saw that she was wearing the captain's uniform. A wet, throaty, gurgling sound issued from her. Before his very eyes, her form twisted and distorted in a grotesque fashion before settling once again in the image of the Captain of the Guards. As the Miller stood dumbfounded, the Shapeshifter raised a hand, striking him a blow that ushered him out of consciousness.

When he came to, he found himself bound tightly and gagged. His head was throbbing once again, and he ached from head to toe. With a groan, he sat up. He was locked in the gaol-cart, which now rumbled through a barren, misty landscape he did not know. But something else he did know. The sweet, poetic chime of a woman's voice rang out.

"There you are. Sleep well? When we reach the castle, you'll do as we say and grind all this up nicely for us, won't you dear?"

The Miller looked down. He was sitting on grain sacks. Dozens of them. His grain. The voice changed, this time to the hard, gravelly tones of the captain.

"See that you do, little man, or you'll be the one getting ground up."

Through his gag, the Miller issued a muffled scream, bringing only laughter from the Shapeshifter – a laughter which alternated every beat between sweet chimes and gravel.

The Fletcher's Tale

†

The Fletcher held her breath, leaning in close as she pressed down hard with her sharpest blade. As she drew the knife slowly along the length of the quill, it split perfectly, satisfyingly in two. On the workbench beside her, an arrow shaft was locked securely in her jib, and with a steady hand she now slid one of the newly cut feathers into position. "There." With the final plume inserted, she only had to apply the binding twine and another fine example of her craft would be complete. She beheld her creation with great satisfaction - a fine bodkin arrow.

At that very moment a loud rapping came from the door, and the Fletcher started. She tutted and rose from her workbench, thankful the interruption had not come any sooner when it might have broken her concentration. She had situated her workshop on the village outskirts for exactly this reason. Out here towards the forest's edge, where the distance between the wooden buildings of the settlement was greater and the paths less well trodden, she went about her delicate work with, for the most part, an assurance of tranquillity. Interruptions such as this were few and far between, and as she walked the length of the shop her irritation eased. She passed several baskets of fine bodkin arrowheads, then the rack of smooth-sanded wooden shafts, the spools of twine she had stored up. Her facility was in good supply, and this was a relaxing situation for a crafter such as her.

The Fletcher unblocked the threshold and was greeted by the serious countenance of the Hunter. She stepped aside and waved the familiar customer in. In silence, the Fletcher waited patiently as the Hunter browsed her wares. She looked down the shaft of a newly formed arrow, thumbed the tip, then rested it on her fingertips to feel the balance. "No," she said, placing it back onto the workbench and picking up another to inspect.

"No?" The Fletcher frowned, hurrying over and taking it up to see for

herself. Her expression soon changed to surprised acceptance when she saw the Hunter was right - this was an arrow which indeed would not fly true - the plumes had slipped just a fraction out of place. "No. But this I can soon remedy," said the Fletcher.

"Very well. Just these," said the Hunter, holding out a fistful of carefully selected arrows. "Six."

"The usual price," nodded the Fletcher, still unsure how to read the expressions on the face of her most regular customer.

Coins were exchanged, and with an awkward word of thanks the Hunter made to leave the workshop. Upon opening the door, she found the way blocked by a hooded man. Seeming surprised to see the Hunter, the man smiled, creasing his pock-marked face and exposing his glistening, black and yellow teeth. "Now then," he said, bringing up his hands and joining his fingertips to form a contemplative prism, "What have we here?" His darting, bloodshot eyes moved over the Hunter's slender form. She gave him a hard look as she pushed past, letting her shoulder slam heavily into his. In this moment of proximity, the man leaned over and hissed aggressively into her ear, "How much, eh?" The Hunter shot him a look of disgust but gave no reply, striding away without looking back. The man watched her go, then gave a grunt of indifference before turning back to address the Fletcher.

"Now then. Show me your very best creations. My master has need of a great many."

*

The man was strange, and as the conversation unfolded his requests proved stranger still. He asked highly unusual questions, uncomfortable ones, and all without the slightest adjustment in his self-satisfied expression. Could the Fletcher make the arrows more painful? Were the tips suitable to take on the application of poison? Perhaps the most disturbing part of his enquiry was the sheer quantity of arrows needed. In an entitled tone, the man imparted that his master wanted

hundreds. The Fletcher had been about to voice her objections when the undesirable customer raised up a large, heavy-looking purse and jiggled it. He raised his eyebrows and smiled his rotten smile, suggesting that price was no object. Against her better judgement, she found herself agreeing - the coin would be enough to see her through an entire winter, with a good deal left over to do with as she pleased. It was an opportunity she might never have again.

The Fletcher was relieved to see the stranger go. Something about his presence made her uneasy, but any apprehension soon passed, and before long the Fletcher was rubbing her hands at the prospect of such a large order. She wasted no time in going about her work, beginning that very day to craft arrow after arrow to the best of her ability, working into the night and rising at daybreak to meet the outlandish demands of the commission. Her mind raced with how she might spend so much coin, but she pushed these thoughts away, focusing on plying her trade even as her hands began to shake with exhaustion.

At length, in the dead of night on the eleventh day, it was done. All about the workshop lay bundles of the finely crafted arrows, each made to the exact specification of the mysterious merchant. Enough for an army, the Fletcher thought; enough for a war. She laid her weary head on the table, closed her eyes and let out a long, satisfied sigh. Just then came a knock at the door - three slow, menacing beats. The Fletcher froze. Who was calling at this hour? The knock came again - three chilling thumps. She slowly opened the door, and there the man stood. He was flanked by several other hooded figures, their faces obscured. The man pushed inside and let out a beat of surprised laughter, clapping his hands together at the sight of the stockpile. At this, his robed gang came pouring in behind him, scooping up the bundles of arrows and ferrying them out to their waiting cart. At its head, a large, muscular stallion was reined, huffing and stamping, restless.

“Everything is as you wished,” said the Fletcher. The man ignored her. He seemed to be thinking. After a moment she continued. “And...as

to the matter of coin, sir?”

At this the man turned and held her gaze, his bloodshot eyes burning into hers. He smiled. It was a thin-lipped smile without warmth, quickly fading from his face as he spoke. “The only transfer of coin will be into my purse - in exchange for you.” He stepped forward, leaning uncomfortably close and looking her up and down. He began muttering, as if vocalising the vile thoughts which ran in torrents through his perverse mind. “Yes...nothing special, but not bad. I know the sort who’ll pay for this.” On instinct, the Fletcher bolted to the door, but the man snapped his fingers and a large figure stepped out to block the threshold. This close, the Fletcher now saw that these hooded figures were not men. This one was far taller and staring into its hood the Fletcher saw no face, only blackness – a hooded shadow. It spoke to its master with a slow, deep voice, “Thy bidding, my Keeper?”

“We take her,” said the man, gesturing to another member of his hooded retinue, who promptly pulled a sack over her head and bludgeoned her with a leather cosh. As her body fell limp, they scooped her up and tossed her onto the cart with the rest of her wares. In a moment the wagon was on the move, pulled by the snorting stallion and flanked by the hooded shadows. With the Keeper at the reigns, it rumbled on, passing into the twisted forest beyond, disappearing into the night.

THE BISHOP'S TALE

†

Your Eminence, May the blessings of the Almighty be with you this day. Regrettably, I write to you with news of a most disturbing nature. I have received reports from the village watchmen of certain happenings which have befallen them of late, the exact nature of which I dare not relay – lest this letter should fall into the wrong hands. Suffice to say, a great evil would appear once again to be darkening the realm. I shall begin my journey immediately, taking with me several older tomes and indeed the hope that my modest learnings might help the villagers to discern some safe passage through these dark times. I would, however, call upon the esteemed and unsurpassed wisdom of your eminence, if it pleases, to bring your own great mind to bear upon these troubles also, and indeed with all possible haste.

May the Lord be with you in all things,

- The Abbot

The Bishop rolled up the scroll, replaced it in the inner pocket of his gown and gazed thoughtfully out of the carriage window. The vehicle rumbled on, its wooden wheels juddering over the cobbled streets as it made its way out of the great city. It was the third time he had read the scroll since departing the cathedral that morning, and still the Abbot's words made uneasy reading. What that man and his deluded order got up to in their misinterpretation of the Lord's word was their business, so long as they continued to support the village with grain and ale from their fields. This latest claim, however, carried with it a weight of meaning that brought all the people of the realm into danger; and a danger of the soul, no less. Whatever their differences in denomination, this matter fell squarely within the Bishop's sworn post of responsibility. He must attend to it, at once.

The Bishop had taken with him a freshly baked boule of bread - round,

soft and steaming with the inimitably fresh aroma that only a prompt delivery from the baker could preserve. He brought it up to his face to breathe deeply of it, muttering praise to the Lord for this divine creation. A moment later he began pulling small, hot morsels from it with his thick fingers, placing each onto his tongue and sucking it into oblivion before reaching for the next. It had to last for the entire journey, but it would never be fresher than now - so the Bishop had his fill.

“Your eminence,” said the coachman. “A crowd...”

“Stop the coach,” the Bishop boomed.

Some twenty or thirty of the great unwashed had gathered up ahead, positioning themselves on this, the only road which led out of the great city, which then led onwards to where the sweet grasslands gave way to more rocky terrain, and patches of giant firs. Word had gotten out, as it always seemed to, that something unsettling was afoot - and now the crowd had been whipped up into a fervour by whatever false information their ringleader was spouting. In the road they were shouting, demanding to know more about this latest threat to their already arduous lives. Some of them raised fists, some weapons. Others shifted from foot to foot in agitation with folded arms, their eyes steeled with entitlement. Only one was motionless - a hooded figure, watching some distance from the crowd, leaning casually against a tree.

The Bishop disembarked to address the baying commoners. “Children,” he raised his hands to the heavens. “My children, pray, calm.” His words had an almost immediate effect, and the rabble quietened. In tones that rang out loud, clear and slow as a tolling bell, he continued.

“After much time spent at prayer this daybreak, I am assured the blessings of the Lord go with me on this journey, that I might reach out to these troubled lands and bring His holy peace upon them, thwarting all who threaten to bring darkness into the light of God’s holy charity...”

The Bishop spoke for some fifteen minutes, and when we finally retook his seat and the coach rumbled on, his words had worked their magic. The crowd were cheering and shouting in adoration of his righteous mission, their mood turned on its head by the wisdom of his well-seasoned sermon.

*

The first night was spent at an inn, the only stop between the city and the vale in which the village lay. At least, the only stop suitable to accommodate the Bishop. The coachman arranged their rooms, bartering hard with the innkeeper over the rate, but then at the Bishop's request proceeding to purchase ale for all in attendance there. It wasn't long before a crowd had gathered around the Bishop's table, listening to one of his stories, scarcely aware of the subtle religious message he always managed to insert. Perhaps it was the ale, perhaps it was the wisdom of the man, but he brought a sincere hush to the place that few troubadours could dream of. Many moved from their places, repositioning chair and bench to better listen. All except one fellow, a hooded man who remained in his shadowy corner for the duration. The Bishop could not place him. The man from the city outskirts, perhaps? Perhaps another. It mattered not. There would always be some black sheep who strayed from the flock.

The Bishop slept well on a bed of straw that night, specially prepared with extra woollens in the best room of the tavern. Morning came, and the coach rumbled on, jostling over the uneven ruts of the country tracks. The greenery became increasingly pleasant to behold from his carriage window as the road twisted on through towering woodland.

On this second day the remaining bread had lost much of its lustre, its crust having hardened, and its innards now reduced to a coarse husk. It was nonetheless worthy of enjoyment, taking on a cake-like texture after a few moments in the mouth, much to the Bishop's pleasure. As the day passed into late afternoon the sky grew grey, laden with a weight of rainclouds that looked sure to soon unleash their burden.

“Your eminence!” the coachman called out as the carriage came to an abrupt halt. The Bishop began to disembark but was immediately met with a knife to the throat. He froze, then slowly raised his hands. A hooded man held the weapon, the one from the inn, the man from the city gates. His gang of bandits now stepped out from the treeline, and the Bishop moved his eyes to see that the coachman found himself in a similar predicament.

“My child...” began the Bishop.

“Save your clever words,” said the hooded man. He looked right into the Bishop’s eyes with true hatred. He hocked up and spat on the Bishop’s boots. “We’ll be taking your coin, your carriage, and those fancy robes you’re wearing. Oh, and I almost forgot. You’re coming with us, fat man.”

“You will address him as your eminence!” the coachman piped. At this, the hooded man nodded to his companion who promptly slit the coachman’s throat and rolled him from the top of the carriage. He landed in the thick mud with a sickening thump, squirming, gurgling his last breaths. “Krillan!” the Bishop cried as the man bled out. He swallowed hard, trying to maintain his composure as tears stung his eyes.

The hooded man now called out to his gang. “Put the fat priest in irons, he can walk the rest of the way. Do him good!” A laugh went up from the men. He leaned in close to address the Bishop privately, his vile breath catching in the holy man’s throat. “The Priestess wants a word with you.”

*

On the third day, there was no bread at all - only the pale moonlight streaking through the bars of the Bishop’s narrow cell, the cold of the stone walls, and the endless wail of tortured souls carrying through the darkness.

THE SHEPHERD'S TALE

†

“Here, Priestess. Come!”

The hound paid its owner no mind. The Shepherd called again, “Priestess, heel!” Nothing - the dog continued her enthusiastic licking of the Cook’s fingers. It didn’t help that the woman was encouraging her, laughing and patting the dog’s side. The Shepherd put her fingers to her lips and let out a short, sharp whistle. At this, the dog broke off immediately and began a lazy lope towards her, in a moment re-taking her place in the pack beside her two sisters, who each sniffed her excitedly as if they had been parted for days. The Shepherd gave the dog a stern look as she ruffled her fur, then shooed her forward with a click of the tongue. “Good girl. On!” The Cook waived a hand of greeting, to which the Shepherd dipped her knees and smiled. The village folk weren’t all bad, she supposed. Still, she wouldn’t tarry here. Before long she was leading her pack of dogs away, on through the village and out, past the Fletcher’s hut and up to the hillside enclosure where her flock awaited her.

The Shepherd breathed deep of the cool morning air as she went. There had been a little rain overnight, it seemed, the grass was still wet underfoot and now the sweet aroma of the damp meadows rose up to fill her senses with a gentle, reassuring pleasure. Her flock, a mere dozen sheep, three of them scarcely more than lambs, retreated to the far size of their wooden pen as the Shepherd and her three hounds approached. She opened the gate, and with a gentle clicking sound and a wave of her hand sent the pack bounding around the fringes of the pen - flanking the sheep, getting in behind them and with well-trained ease sending them into a clumsy, bleating trot out of the gate. The Shepherd smiled and began to ascend the hillside as they streamed past her, whistling for the dogs to keep them corralled in a tight group as they went.

Reaching the top of the hill never ceased to give the Shepherd pause. After half an hour of meandering ascent, head down, thighs burning, tongue clicking at her dogs, she finally crested the tor and drank in the stunning view of the valley below. From here she had a commanding view; on one side the village with its wooden rooftops, well-trodden paths and drifting pillars of comforting chimney smoke; on the other, the marvellous Abbey, cosseted as it was by swaying fields of golden barley, corn and wheat. And between these, the boundless acres of sweet grasslands, punctuated by pleasing clumps of ancient woodland and patches of seasonal wildflower, running out along the rising hills before giving way to more rocky terrain and ranks of giant firs.

As the day drew on a cold wind blew in from the north, bringing with it a pillar of dark cloud – wide and menacing. The Shepherd looked upon it with apprehension – these were the kind that would bring fierce storms by nightfall if the gale did not relent. But there was something else. As the wind picked up, the flock became restless, backing away, retreating in the direction the wind willed them, heedless even of the hounds. Indeed, the dogs seemed to sense something too. They were rooted to the spot, snouts to the wind, growling at the brewing storm. The Shepherd crouched beside Priestess. She stroked her, trying to calm her faithful friend. Over so many years together, she had never seen her this agitated. The dog was bearing its teeth and snarling, ears pinned back. The Shepherd looked out, following her eye line. That is when she saw it. Saw something. A glimpse of a dark shape, disappearing into the cloud. Her eye only caught it for a moment. It looked like part of a large creature, soaring where no bird would dare, in and out of the churning storm. Bolts of lightning flashed among it all and thunder boomed out over the valley. In one such flash the shape was illuminated, only for a fleeting moment before it plunged back into the clouds and out of view - an enormous, dark wing. The Shepherd shuddered, unsure of what she had just witnessed. On instinct, she clicked her tongue and led the flock away.

For the remainder of the day she let them graze on the slopes at the far side of the valley, sheltered from the oncoming winds and far enough

away that the storm would never reach them before nightfall. The restlessness of the animals soon passed, but the Shepherd could not forget the strange sighting. She tried to push it from her mind, taking comfort in the pleasures of her work. Heavy droplets of rain began to tap at her leathers. The Shepherd raised her head skyward and closed her eyes. She let out a moan of pleasure as a droplet rolled down her cheek - so refreshing, so natural, healing. It soothed her, and in a heartbeat she remembered why she so enjoyed her work. Nothing could reach her out here. It was just her, her dogs, and her precious flock. The gossip of the village, the politics of the vale, none of it troubled her or her little family, not up here on the hillside. She loved it, and they loved it too, happily chewing the luscious grass and even breaking into the occasional frolic. The Shepherd laid herself down on the bank, sinking into the moment - the gentle patter of rain, the soft crunch of her grazing flock, the occasional soothing bleat. Priestess padded over and snuggled-in beside her. Together, they drifted off into a blissful sleep.

The Shepherd awoke. Priestess was up, growling, and immediately she knew something was wrong. The flock was restless, vocal, scampering in all directions, falling over each other as they went. The sky had grown dark above, the storm closing in, moving over the vale at impossible speed. The rain was torrential now, powerful droplets sending spatters of mud high into the air. Thunder boomed overhead, and to the Shepherd's horror a blast of lightning struck the ground - straight into the flock. Several of the sheep were thrown into the air, their bodies dropping back motionless to the hillside. The Shepherd was up, running to them, Priestess barking at her side. As she reached their charred bodies, she realised there was no sign of the other two dogs. She whistled for them, but just then a deafening screech rang out, and the sound of heavy wingbeats filled the air. The Shepherd froze, quaking with fear as from over the crest a hideous winged creature emerged - flapping and hovering, its scaly skin slick with rain, its red eyes piercing the gloom. It held a hound in each of its terrifying talons. The Shepherd screamed. The dogs were headless,

and the creature's jaws streamed with blood. The beast let the dog's carcasses drop to the ground. It roared once again and swooped for the Shepherd herself. The monster scooped up both her and Priestess as if they were ragdolls, and the Shepherd felt her heart ache as Priestess yelped in pain, the claws of the creature digging deep into her hide. The monster took flight at impossible speed, soaring to a sudden, dizzying height with barely a beat of its enormous wings. The Shepherd couldn't scream now. She could hardly breathe, all but crushed in the beast's infernal grasp, arms and legs dangling as she looked down helplessly, straining to retain focus at such speeds. In a moment they had left the vale behind and were passing over a dense, twisted forest, beyond which a vast, barren landscape of fallow fields stretched out under rolling mists. Rising from this blackened terrain was the castle – jutting into the air like a grotesque, twisted black claw. The creature banked hard and lurched towards it, joining-up with several others of its kind as they made dizzying circles of the highest tower. It let out a deafening screech, and with a single motion plucked off Priestess's head. The poor hound's body was released, discarded, dropped, and so was the Shepherd. She screamed once more, plummeting through the churning skies towards the castle towers below, her body flooded with raw panic. She barely managed to brace herself as she glanced a sloping roof, then slammed into another – each of the devastating impacts breaking her fall but also several her bones in the process. Finally, her leathers snagged on a spiked railing and she was jolted violently downward, landing hard on a stone courtyard. Shocked and broken, the Shepherd wheezed, drawing in a desperate breath with great difficulty. She was barely alive. Her only sensation was pain. There was the sound of footsteps approaching, and with it voices – sinister, heartless laughter. She tried to raise her head to see who was coming, but passed from consciousness.

The Butcher's Tale

†

The beast stank. It was not a rancid, rotten smell, but the kind of musky, earthy stench unique to freshly hunted game. A good stink. This familiar mix of soil, sweat and shit marked for the Butcher the start of a good, honest day's work.

The Hunter had brought this particular deer to him at dawn, draped over her shoulders, letting it thump down onto the Butcher's block like so many times before. And, as usual, there had been little in the way of a verbal exchange between the two old friends - her looking overly pleased with herself, and the Butcher giving her no more than a nod of earnest approval.

"You'll have another by sunset," she had told him before pushing through the flaps of his shop and disappearing out into early morning light. The Butcher had only grunted absently, already beginning to size up the creature, running his hands over the hide, mentally preparing for the skinning process.

Now the Butcher went about his work. With practiced ease, he made his initial cuts around the bends of each leg, joining these with longer cuts under the deer's belly. When he had enough loose skin to get a good, purchasing grip, he braced himself with a boot upon the table's edge and began to pull, rolling back the hide towards the shoulders until it reached the neck. There was only one way to get it past the head. It was time for the bone saw. "Sorry, old fellow."

With the head removed, the Butcher was able to pull the hide away as one continuous piece. After admiring it for a moment he threw it into a basket of other skins. He'd let the Tanner deal with that. With the animal skinned, now he could really get stuck in. He gave the exposed muscle a customary slap, wiped some of the blood from his hands onto his apron, then reached for his largest cleaver.

The look of pleasure on the Cook's face upon opening her door to be greeted by the sight of the Butcher, a bucket of fine cuts of meat under one arm and a basket of skins under the other, was a rewarding part of his day. He in turn was greeted by the hearty aroma of freshly baked pastry within. Coins changed hands, and after some simple conversation the Butcher made to go on his way. He stopped at the threshold when the Cook called after him, asking if he didn't mind leaving the basket of skins with her instead of taking them directly on to the Tanner. She wanted to make a broth, and she promised to pass them on later in the day. The Butcher agreed and was glad to set down the rest of his burden outside her door.

With a few extra minutes of leisure added to his day, the Butcher made his way back through the village at a slow pace. He even paused to rub his back, taking a moment to enjoy the pleasantness of the evening. As much as he relished his work, there was something about the cool, fresh air, the dappled sunshine streaking through the gentle covering of slowly drifting clouds that set his mind at ease. As he gazed out across the surrounding lands, something caught his eye - movement in the treeline, a flickering shadow just beyond the forest's edge. The Butcher watched for a moment. It was a hooded man, travelling alone, slowly pulling a rickety old cart behind him. It appeared to be filled with sacks, boxes and bottles. Curiosity got the better of the Butcher, and he broke away from the village path to stride boldly across the open meadow in the direction of the mysterious wagoner.

The Butcher caught up with the cart some distance into the forest. The sun was setting, and a strange gloom was beginning to settle among the ancient trunks. The intriguing stranger brought his cart to a halt and greeted the Butcher amiably, his black cat mewing from its perch atop the cart. This was a strange old man, his features drawn thin and wrinkled by the ravages of time, yet his glittering eyes carrying a suggestion of mischief. As a gesture of good will, he insisted the Butcher sample his latest brew - a healing elixir, he claimed. A spiked

club dangled from his belt, and the Butcher saw little wisdom in offending the man. He took the bottle, and after holding the man's gaze for a moment smiled and took a long draw. The Butcher wiped his mouth and handed it back with a nod, holding in his grimace at the foul taste. The two men exchanged a look. The stranger held the Butcher's gaze for an unnatural amount of time, eyes full of anticipation. He raised his eyebrows in a suggestive manner. At this, a sense of alarm began to creep over the Butcher. His vision began to swim, his belly cramping up just as fast. "Oi, what...what have you..." He hunched over, clutching his side, leaning against the wagon for support as he staggered towards the man. The old traveller merely smiled. The Butcher lashed out, swinging a meaty fist but missing wildly, his momentum sending him crashing to the ground as his world turned to darkness.

*

The Butcher awoke. The smell hit him first. This chamber stank. It was a rotten, rancid smell – the kind which emanates only from decaying flesh. On reflex, his nose wrinkled. He was naked, lying on a large wooden table, bound at the wrists and ankles by thick rope. Two men stood over him, their faces obscured by masks of dirty white cotton, their aprons streaked with blood. One man was large and muscular, the other small and jittery. All around, the remains of human bodies hung from the walls, brutally impaled on hooks and suspended by hefty chains. The Butcher tried to cry out, biting down hard on a wooden handle which was bound tightly to his face, muffling his voice. The large man remained indifferent to this, talking calmly to the other in a deep, slow voice. He was relating precise details about the intention behind his every movement, in the way a master might go about the schooling of a young apprentice.

"Next, we must remove the skin entirely," he said, raising a thin, jagged blade and drawing a sound of awed appreciation from his pupil. With all his might, the Butcher struggled to break free, his muscles straining, skin burning as he twisted against the restraints.

The ropes held fast as the cold knife began to slide under his skin.

“The initial cuts are to be made around the bends of each leg,” said the large man earnestly. “These are joined to longer cuts around the belly.”

“...cuts around the belly.” The apprentice parroted.

Through muted screams, the Butcher felt every inch of the blade’s clumsy movement.

“When we have enough loose skin to get a good, purchasing grip, we begin to roll it back towards the shoulders until it reaches the head,” the tutor continued.

The Butcher was fading now, trembling, losing control and slipping in and out of consciousness.

“But what about the head, Sir?” the little man asked eagerly.

The last thing he saw was the larger man holding out an expectant hand to his grovelling assistant.

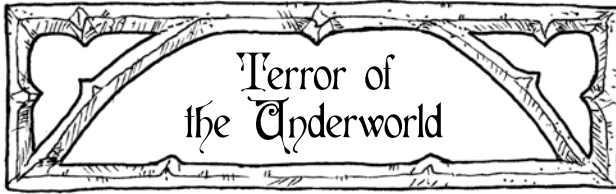
“Bone saw.”

*

The Butcher awoke with a start. He sat up, frantically patting himself down, relieved to find his clothes, and his skin, intact. A moment later, the true nightmare of his incarceration hit home like a keen cleaver slamming into the Butcher’s block. Slam, the cold stone walls. Slam, the thick iron bars. Slam, the sheer impossibility of escape.

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In the beginning, anger raged in the void – the first soul. Anger became courage, and courage became a shield against the darkness. The darkness grew, shattering the confines of the void, casting countless fractured souls into the expanse. This we came to know as time. Beyond time, darkness found a new ally and called it chaos. Courage rose to meet it, and so the battle raged, and so it rages still.

It was in one such crucible of fury, a rent in time, a conflux of chaos and darkness, that the first of the true evils came to be. It fed on pain, gorged on fear. It was the spirit of terror, and when the time was right it placed a seed deep in the souls of men. The seed remains.

-Extract from Rengorn's *Origin of Fear*

*

The Terror of the Underworld exists only in the tales of drunken travellers, the warnings of mystics, the superstitious ramblings of the mad. They say he grew, not from a babe but from below, from the very rock of the earth itself, from the deepest and most ancient fabrics of which existence is composed. This is the reason they flock to him – the foul denizens of the dark, the unspeakable creatures of the underworld. He is elemental. Their father, their leader, their god. They say his commands carry the weight of thunder, that his movements shake the earth, that his spirit is kin to the utter depths of true evil – that within him, anger rages in the void.


To look upon him is to look upon death. Those who claim to have no fear of death have merely never seen him. As if to mock our weakness, he has been known to take on the form of a man, only taller, broader,

and with the head of some foul, primal demon beyond description. His eyes hold the fires of a thousand hells, his mouth is a portal to eternal darkness, and through his fingertips run the broken dreams of his victims.

The Terror's domain encompasses all the subterranean realms, between which he can pass with the fluidity of oil over stone. He draws to him the basest, most vicious of creatures, endowing them with yet more grotesque and powerful mutations before setting them to work. Maintaining a constant vigil in each of his domains, they bring to him the souls required to feed his voracious appetite. The result is a sea of blood, an unending mound of sacrificial bodies, each brought before the Terror to be slain in the most despicable way.

His objective is simple: To ignite the seed of terror within you, to undermine your courage and bring you to his endless carnival of slaughter. He hopes that you will fight, that your desperation at facing certain death will spur your inner darkness and send you into thrashes of rage – for with each blow you strike upon him does he grow in strength. Your futile defences will only provide amusement for his monstrous retinue as they claw at your faltering flesh, and he alone will choose the moment in which to crush you. Then, as you hope shatters, he will feast upon your soul, and in doing so become stronger still.

He exists to kill you.



The Death Knight

The boy who would grow to become the one they call the Death Knight began his life as any other of his time. Low born, he was the all but anonymous son of a hardworking blacksmith, and the youngest of nine brothers. As is so often the way with siblings, he was bullied terribly by his brothers, always pushed into the background, forced to battle for every scrap of attention, let alone food, on offer. Deep within him, a hatred began to gnaw.

Perhaps hoping to prove his worth, perhaps seeking some form of escape, the boy took to crime. He was inevitably caught, convicted, and at just 11 spent a week in the village stocks. Of all those who pelted him with rocks, rotten fruits and worse during his punishment, his brothers were always at the forefront. As each day lengthened, his hatred blossomed into a deep-seated darkness.

When he was released, his brothers took him out into the woodland, declaring that the beating he was about to receive was for his own good – that he needed to learn discipline after what he had done. But they did not see the true nature of what their cruelty had shaped. In a moment, the boy's hatred surged through him, and that day he slew all eight of his brothers with his bare hands. They did not land a single blow.

The boy fled - retreating deeper into the woodland and wandering far beyond, to a barren land of rolling mists and strange stillness. A place, perhaps, where he could hide away. Yet his exploits had not escaped the attention of those who make it their business to observe such things, and soon the boy was captured and taken to work as a slave in the fighting pits of the Dark Castle. There, he found a new outlet for

his pain and rage. In exchange for food and respect, he fought other boys, proving to be a source of great entertainment for the foul inhabitants of that evil place. He killed, he ate, he was applauded. For the first time, life - and death - made sense to him.

In time, this boy became a man, and the greatest champion the pits had ever known. He relished his infamy, the attention it brought, the sense of personal glory it stoked inside him. His only trouble in life was his keeper - the fat, slovenly master of the pits. Having taken him prisoner as a boy, and despite his many victories, the man still treated him as a foolish child. Daily, he bullied him, restricting his rations and questioning why he had not been yet more brutal in his last fight. You will not be surprised to learn the boy slew him too, but the ensuing frenzy this brought out in him was different. In the apotheosis of his rage, he revelled in the man's torn remains, smearing them wildly across the arena floor, baying at the crowd. The strange pattern this gruesome display created in the sand was burned forever into the minds of all who witnessed it. A legend was born.

He embarked on a rampage that very day, and other fighters rose up to follow him. Their rebellion from the pits set a killing spree in motion, soaking the castle in blood. It will be many ages yet before those days and nights of slaughter are forgotten. With each victim the mutineers claimed, the same symbol was left as a sign of their dominance. In little time, that symbol became a brand of fear and a mark of powerful status, then grew to be an icon of bloody worship. More and more flocked to the deathly power of those who bore it. It was around this time that the low born boy who had grown into a champion of the fighting pits became known as the Death Knight.

Beyond the indulgences of food, wine, women and fearful obedience, the Death Knight found his new status afforded him stranger opportunities still. His appetite for power was insatiable and, in his greed, he sought out the darkest corners of the castle. There, he forged alliances with those who wielded a power greater even than his own.

They would endow him with the strength to curse his enemies from afar, and in exchange he would supply them with a steady feast of souls. These, he knew he could provide.

And so, the reign of the Death Knight began - his deranged, deformed followers travelling the lands, hauling any who would not join his cult back to the castle, either to be used as sport in the games of the pit or sacrificed to appease the thirsting powers to which their master pays fealty.

Some say the man who became the Death Knight died many ages past, that his armour is now inhabited by his spirit alone, still hungering for the sport of combat, still inspiring a cult of fanatics and sending curses to shackle the souls of the weak and weary.

The only thing that is certain is that all who have ventured near that place utter the same simple warning: Beware the curses, beware the Death Knight!

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*You know him as the hired thug, who breaks good men for gold
You know him as the tavern wench, desire taking hold
You know him as the demon face, who bids the darkness come
You know him here, you know him there, you know him all and none.*
- *Traditional Poem*

When the first of the fractured souls was cast into the expanse at the shattering of the void, there was one alone who lingered. Possessed of the spirit of darkness and acting in the fulfilment of some primordial instinct it grew, stretching out its tendrils over an impossible vastness. There it hung, a sensitive receptacle unseen and unsensed. During the formation of time it lay still, seeing, hearing, and feeling all that would ever come to pass - observing and absorbing the essence of every living permutation in unfathomable detail, weaving itself into the fabric of all things.

In the archives of every library and in the stories of every tradition will you find reference to the being we have come to know as the Shapeshifter. The faceless man, the Night-Form, the Woman of Water - whatever name it goes by, there is always singular agreement that nothing else in this world is known to possess such a remarkable, inscrutable power. For the shapeshifter is a being like no other, a cosmic being beyond our laws, capable of assuming any form it so chooses, even that of time itself.

In its vanity, its evil arrogance, it can be found meddling in what might seem to be the most insignificant of events. From the pompous

pursuits of the nobility to the gruelling, mundane lives of low-born commoners, it plies its trickery to bring misfortune down upon the unwary. Posing as a beautiful woman, an old friend, or a creature beyond imagination, it manipulates and ensnares, indulging its despicable appetite for the extremes of fear, hatred and despair. There are none who can detect any falsehood in the shapeshifter's mocking art, lest they see the change itself take place. But do not for a heartbeat fool yourself that this being is merely a mischievous spirit. Wherever there is sufficient evil to enact, it has been known to murder, replace, and then fully live out the life of its victim – for time has no relevance to one such as this. Malevolence, corruption and ruin are its only purpose, and so it toys with humankind.

It is not difficult to imagine how a being of such uncanny ability might amass a devoted following of depraved servants and soldiers, ready to carry out its nefarious will. For a master who might show them whatever their black heart's desire, who shares their pleasure in the foul deceit of the innocent, who is indifferent to the pain and even death of mortals – there are few among the ranks of evil that would not willingly bend the knee. And yet this is of little consequence to the Shapeshifter who, in its aeons of existence, has repeatedly amassed followings many thousand strong, only to suddenly abandon them – disappearing for millennia, reappearing only at a time of its choosing. At such times, it is again not long before word of its evil-doing draws a fresh retinue to its side. For who would dare disobey a being which, at any moment, might assume the form of their greatest terror?



While the insidious powers that govern the castle ebb and flow with the passing of millennia, with a great many dark tyrants rising and falling as their dominions wax and wane, it is the treasures of the castle alone which remain constant in their glory. Nowhere in all the realm has there ever been a hoard of such inestimable worth as that which exists in the depths of the castle today. Though much of it may be foul and rotten, broken and soiled or besmirched by unthinkable deeds, the hoard nonetheless contains some of the most powerful relics, legendary weapons, and strictly forbidden texts this world has ever known. The hoard is a priceless asset, amassed over countless ages, growing still even now, and something over which every ruler has sought to retain mastery. This, it has been proven, is not an easy task.

Among the many inhabitants of the castle, from its gruesome guards to the impossible monsters that wander its depths, and even from without, there are many who yearn to have their fill of this bountiful supply. If this were permitted the hoard would soon diminish, and with it much of the power of the castle itself. It must be protected, and to this task is assigned The Keeper of the Hoard – the one who holds the key, who collects and catalogues every item, ever ready to wage the constant, unwinnable war against those seeking to steal from it, all the while amassing more and more for the glory of his dark masters.

The Keeper has served many such masters, each of them recognising that to control the hoard is to wield great power. Slay the keeper, and

many treasures would be lost. Without the hoard, with its near bottomless supply of weapons and armour, how would rank upon rank of evil forces be armed and made ready for battle? So it is that the Keeper has elevated himself to an indispensable, untouchable rank, standing his ground against any who would seek to dominate the castle, never fully bending the knee even as he professes his loyalty, and always keeping one eye open for the right moment – when he might make his move and leverage the power of his treasures to seize the castle for himself.

For now, he is quite content to bide his time. Such an office affords The Keeper no shortage of opportunities for miscreant behaviour. He has become well-known in certain circles of nobility and is often visited by rich nobleman of the realm, who venture from the safety of their woollen beds in search of the forbidden. For the right price, the Keeper can provide them with whatever their dark heart's desire. He trades not only in relics and coin, but also in flesh and blood. Slaves to brutalise, blood to quench your thirst, man or beast, living or dead – all are available. For, ultimately, the Keeper understands it is only the value we attach to things that speaks of true power. For the Keeper knows all too well that everything has a value – and everything a price.



“Come now, my child. Hurry up – or The Dark One will get you!”

For many centuries now have mothers warned their children thus, upon the tender act of tucking them into bed on a chill winter’s night. This softly spoken fable is usually met with wide-eyed awe, with nervous laughter, or perhaps with a healthy dose of true fear. And yet, little do those who use these words know how close they come to speaking truth, how much reality lies in this time-honoured fantasy.

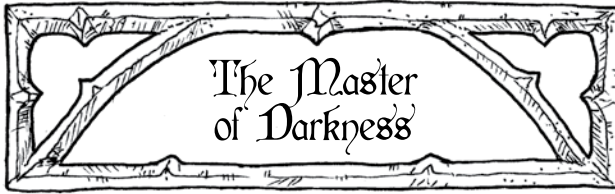
For the Dark One is more than a frivolous bedtime tale. It is the very essence of darkness, the spirit of the night from which those mothers shield their babes with firm walls, thick blankets, sweet kisses. For all eternity, it has harvested the souls of the departed. Not only is it capable of killing without question to quench this endless thirst, but worse, of then imbuing those devoured souls with a strange manner of living death. These monstrous entities form its host, plaguing the night, securing its dominance. They move as shadows, lurking in the dark, watching always for an opportunity to persecute the good and true, to usher their souls to the feet of the Dark One. Armoured corpses rising from their tombs; ethereal spirits granted insidious form; skeletal creatures hauled back into grotesque animation – all are the product of its dark magic, its sinister will, and all are bent solely on dragging new souls to their death. For only then can the Dark One draw its power, only in the silence of what lies beyond can the words of its ritual take their application.

There is nowhere it cannot go, and for every soul it holds the trap - the secret lure, the method through which to divert their senses,

distracting them just long enough that it might enter their world, take form, and steal upon them. It speaks to us in dreams, drawing us out of our beds as we still slumber. It is the purveyor of dark magic – a force as strong as it is mysterious. It is not known how it first came to channel this destructive power, only that in doing so its once human form was entirely consumed. Those few who understand say it now stalks between dimensions, free of the bonds of time, seeking out new realms of darkness in the expanse. It returns only to haunt its earthly domains – for they, like no other, can feed its hunger so readily.

The Dark One is always hunting, always seeking to destroy all who threaten its source of power. Above all, its enemies are the clergy - the abbots, priests, and bishops of the realm. Their incessant quest for the afterlife, the holy power of their relics, and the belief they inspire in the souls of the faithful - these are a constant bane to its sinister ends. It is they who form the final barrier, the thin veil that prevents the Dark One's goal of eternal darkness. The question is, how long can it hold?

When the chill nights of winter draw in, mothers would do well to heed their own warning.



The Master of Darkness

They say he was once a wanderer, an adventurous explorer with a taste for danger. He had travelled to every realm, conversed with every people, encountered every beast that roamed the land. A chronically curious man, he was drawn always to the darker nature of things, prone to wandering the wrong place at the wrong time and tingling with the thrill of the trespass and its risk. The things his eyes must have seen go far beyond the imaginings of most, and much outrageous gossip was relayed at inns and brothels before his disappearance. For indeed, he never truly returned from his exploration of the Dark Castle. It is not known whether this was by choice or otherwise, but entering by some low, hidden door in the rock on which the abomination rests was the last many ever saw of him – at least in a form recognisable as a man.

There, while he still had his sight, it is said that he became master of the beasts that dwell in the darkness, gifted with an aura, an extra sense with which he could reach out even to the foulest creature. After all his years of wandering, perhaps he had found a danger truly worthy of his lasting attention. Over time, he found he could call upon great terrors from the darkest caves beneath the castle walls, coaxing from hiding strange and deadly beasts, shepherding each new monstrous discovery to do his dark bidding. The beast-man, the lurching ghoul, the Bloodthirster – with each of them he holds some special, unspoken bond.

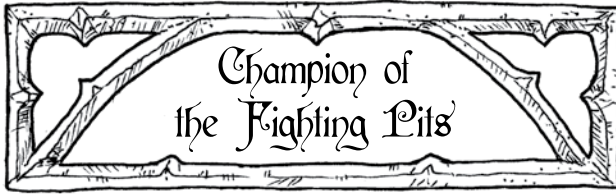
Of course, these gifts came at a price – and the price was flesh. In his vanity, he took to covering his body in long robes, themselves torn to shreds but serving still to hide from view the many atrocities afflicted upon him during the various missteps which occurred on his

journey towards mastery. Most of his skin has been torn away and little remains of his ravaged face, save for the gaping mouth through which he sucks down the thick, damp air of his domain.

His eyes were taken by a pack of gargoyles which set upon him during an ill-fated attempt to bring them under his spell. When they took his first eye, he used what little sight remained to wrestle it back from the clutches of the offending creature. His second was taken moments later. Yet to the aspiring master, the encounter with the gargoyles was not entirely unsuccessful. He did forge one new link during the bloody episode, with the very beast that took his sight, reaching a powerful psychic understanding only as they wrestled for possession of his eyeballs.

For many, this would have been the end. For the tenacious Master of Darkness, it was merely the end of the beginning – and a new opportunity. For what use are eyes in true darkness? In the years of blindness that followed, his greatest talent came to the fore. Through some unnatural training, they say his mind became capable of leaving his body, of taking flight, of fleeing his mortal frame to soar through the castle passages as a winged shadow, all-seeing, all-hearing. It knows no physical barrier, passing through stone as easily as it does the open air – even visiting and merging with the minds of man and beast when it wishes. In a moment it races to the highest tower, in the next to a cavern deep below ground. In this way, little escapes his knowledge, and the breadth of his prodigious power brings him ever greater fealty from the beasts with which he shares the darkness.

Whenever his mind is at flight, his gargoyle companion stands guard at his shoulder, ready to alert him of any threat to his mortal body - at which point the Master of Darkness will recall his mind in the beat of a wing and draw his savage blade, ready to greet his guests.



After the Great Pit Rebellion - the bloody uprising which saw the one who has since become known as The Death Knight bring organised arena combat crashing down upon itself, the fighting pits did not simply cease to be. It was not long before the foul, unsatiated hungers of the castle inhabitants spilled over once more, breaking out into numerous, smaller fighting grounds where the tradition lived on in its most basic form. Ranging from private chambers where groups of wealthy nobles ran perverse syndicates, to the lowest gutters of the castle sewers where challenges were settled unobserved in near total darkness - hundreds of new 'pits' sprang up. Blood was shed, just as before. Coins changed hands, crowds cheered, and violence reigned supreme once more. Without a pit-master, however, there was no structure to these new offshoots, and few rules. Gone were the days when a network of enslaved combatants was cultivated, daily sent to their certain slaughter at the hands of seasoned warriors, all to appease the baying crowds. Things were different now. The fighting had grown more intense, more tightly contested than ever before, and at last a new breed of warrior stepped forward, born of the necessity to be ready at any time and to face any foe in any location.

From this chaos emerged a nameless killer. Hideously deformed and possessed of monstrous fighting ability, the very sight of him was enough to strike terror into the hearts of any who faced him. Their terror was short-lived, as each opponent was quickly dispatched with frightening brutality by this paragon of martial skill. They say he learned his craft in the fighting pits of old, that he might have been a champion to rival even the Death Knight himself had the entire system not collapsed when it did.

And so, long after The Death Knight disappeared into the darker realms of the castle, whispers pervade elsewhere that there still remains an active, undefeated Champion of the Fighting Pits. Bearing this name and brandishing it as his sole purpose, they say he now roams the castle depths, seeking all and any who might be foolish enough to challenge him. Wherever he appears, he leaves death in his wake, slaying man and beast alike without question. He carries with him his large wooden shield, the cornerstone of his fighting style and symbol of his impenetrable power. He moves as if it were weightless, using its mighty form to deflect the blows of his opponents or force them off balance as he brings to bear the deadly fury of his spiked flail. The whisperers say he has taken to tackling multiple opponents in a single match, always seeking a greater challenge.

In the long annals of the castle, there has only been one other who might rival him: The Death Knight himself. And it is perhaps this legendary warrior the Champion is seeking, fighting all comers in the hope of luring out the mysterious knight. For without this final victory the Champion can never claim to be truly Undisputed. If the two should ever meet, it would surely be a battle worthy of legend.



In the beginning, anger raged in the void - the first soul, so the legend goes. The darkness grew, breaking free of the confines of the void and in the ensuing war between Chaos and Courage were countless fractured souls cast into the expanse. All this is known, to those whose life is devoted to studying such unknowable things. But what became of the void? In the phenomenon known as The Entity, perhaps we may find some manner of answer.

This strange traveller is at once a void, at once an orb of light, at once a swirling sphere of dark energy - mystifying and terrifying to all who behold it. It exists in the fireside tales of countless peoples in countless lands, passed from one generation to the next since the beginning of time, wearing many different names as it goes. But its image remains familiar. In the vast wildernesses of the realm, the walls of cave-dwellings are adorned with ancient carvings unmistakably resembling its form; and even upon the oldest, most prized and crumbling parchments of the greatest libraries will you find crude sketches of it, these often being surrounded by intricate writings in a language long-forgotten.

Some say it has no origin, that in fact it was the origin of all things - the prime mover, the portal through which all things passed at the Great Formation, and that it remains to this day the gate through which all things must pass to enter our world, including us. In this way, there are those who believe it is both guardian and gate-keeper - an arbiter with the power to decide what lives, what dies, and what comes to pass. All of us have encountered it, in this version of events; and yet none of us truly know it.

It exists in a near silence, appearing here and there without warning, either capable of travelling any distance in the blink of an eye, or of existing simultaneously in more than one place. A strange, distant buzzing sound is audible to those who draw near to it, seemingly generated by the tendrils of energy which swirl constantly about it – an impossible, mesmeric display that has been known to bring insanity to even the most steadfast of minds.

Make no mistake, The Entity is far from inanimate. There is much evidence of it having taken seemingly wilful action, though its motives shall likely remain forever perplexing. Those unfortunate enough to have attracted its ire have suffered the lash of its tendrils, which fly outward to seize upon its chosen target. At their touch, the mortal flesh sizzles and burns as the tendrils fuse tightly around the bone. Then begins the slow, steady inward motion as the captive is drawn closer to the void at its core. It cannot be prevented.

It could be that to pass into the void at its centre is to travel a great distance, to traverse space and time, passing into a dimension beyond the realm of imagination for a purpose known only to The Entity. Indeed, at its centre flash visions of other places, other peoples, other times. Others believe that to be drawn into the void is to be dismantled, dissolved, assimilated into its consciousness or scattered to the eternal darkness of the expanse beyond. Suffice to say, none have lived to tell the tale.



The Beastmaster

There resides within us all a wild and furious creature. A darkness, a devil, a beast. Call it what you will, but from the moment of our birth it is denied, repressed, buried. Trapped within our mortal frame it writhes, churning, grown bitter with captivity – warring with our dominant souls in an endless battle for recognition. We can glimpse it in our fits of rage, feel it in our darkest lusts, and in the rarest and most extreme instances some of us may even learn to embrace it. For most, it is a truth not easily accepted, a dark reality far easier to ignore than confront. There are but a few who know the true power of the animal spirit, few who have fully explored the many layers of its nature. Of these few, the Beastmaster stands alone in his mastery.

By the arduous acquisition of dark, forbidden lore, the mysterious Beastmaster has learned the way, the sacred ritual by which the beast-form is released. In the moments immediately following death, just as the soul leaves the body, in the time before the cooling of the mortal frame entombs the beast forever, this rite must be performed. Those who have seen it tell of the Beastmaster walking slowly over the field of battle with his palms outstretched, searching, feeling for a worthy subject. When a body is chosen the incantation begins immediately, the ancient verses rolling from his tongue as he carries out the curious gestures of the spell. The head of the corpse is thrown back, the spine pushed in an arch as from the throat a pillar of black smoke begins to rise, growing and thickening as the body quakes below. From this unholy cloud of shifting darkness, the shadow-creature takes its true form – a billowing shade, an apparition fully foul and wild. No longer confined to its chamber of bone and tissue, it is unleashed at last – a raw and unique manifestation ready to claim its birth right.

To draw out the beast-form is one thing. To control it is quite another. To this end, the Beastmaster has in his possession a relic of supreme power – the Shadow Trident. It is said he made an unfavourable pact with the Keeper of the Hoard to procure this priceless artefact, that in time the Beastmaster will pay for his brief period of power with his own life. For now, wielding his mighty forked weapon and speaking his dark words, the Beastmaster possesses the singular ability to bring the shadow-beasts to heel. They follow him, the giver of life, the master of freedom, commander and shepherd of the shadow pack, ever ready to rise from the shadows to obey his commands – unleashing their ferocity at his behest until such time as he chooses to cast them back into the darkness. What he will do with this control, or for how long it can be sustained, only time will tell.



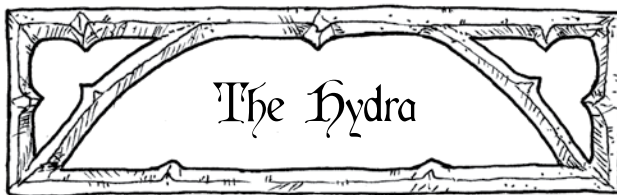
There was a time, though some claim it false, when all was well - a lofty age when colourful banners streamed from the castle turrets, when laughter echoed through the sunlit courtyards and great, joyous feasts marked the passing of the seasons. During this golden time lived a young, ambitious queen. She was kind to the servants, generous to her people and a great seeker of knowledge. She oversaw the curation of great libraries, bringing to her castle the finest books and relics of the land, to be studied, stored and preserved. It was a time of greatness, a time of glory, justice and peace.

The exact details of what followed are lost to the ravages of time, but the downfall of this glittering age appears to have begun with the arrival of a traveller from a distant land. Some records describe this visitor as little more than an orb of light, others as a sphere of darkness - the exact description matters not. The visitor was discovered in the bowels of the castle - silent, passive, seemingly content to merely occupy its chosen chamber day and night. In the years which followed it remained just so, even as the wisest and most learned of the realm came to examine it. The Entity was reasoned with, showered with gifts, addressed in every language spoken in the land, but still it gave not the slightest reaction in return, nor any clue as to why it had come. Decades passed, and many who were there at the beginning died never learning its true nature. Others went mad gazing into its swirling centre, mesmerised by the visions they saw within. At last, with no other course of action left, it was ignored - and became regarded as one more strange relic within the queen's burgeoning collection.

It was during this time that something slipped through the dark portal at The Entity's core. A slithering darkness, an oozing evil slowly

sliding into the castle, unseen in the dead of night. Some say it was the spirit of evil, others that it was The Player of Games returning to bring a close to this impossible fantasy. Either way, it marked the beginning of the end. The darkness spread, its corruption creeping into the hearts of all who dwelled within the castle – even the queen herself. She became bitter, her habits growing crueller by the day, her ambition exaggerated into deluded tyranny. Her once-happy people suffered, with many fleeing the castle, some fleeing the realm altogether. Those that remained grew twisted, deformed in body and warped of mind. The castle's first torturer was appointed, and the remaining subjects were mutilated at the queen's command – forced to swear eternal loyalty or die.

With the darkness came monsters. The queen grew desperate, unable to hold back the advance of impossible creatures pouring through the portal day by day. Sensing how brittle her reign was becoming, she did the only thing her all-consuming ambition would allow. If a new reign of darkness was afoot, she would embrace and lead it. They say that in her final days the queen scoured the most forbidden texts, sought out the darkest and most ancient words of power she had amassed. We will never know the terms of the bargain, but in her greatest act of depravity a pact was made with the darkness, the queen herself being granted dominion over the spirit realm. She wasted no time in solidifying her new domain, nominating her once beloved king to be chief among the harvesters of souls, the cardinal of the damned, despatching him on an endless quest to supply her with immortal energies. These she forces into the frames of the dead, reanimating them into jittering horrors to form the ranks of her inexhaustible armies. Still, even with the strength of the damned at her disposal, she cannot escape the fearful notion that she might lose her grip on power. From her bone-clad throne she rages day and night, all that she was once forgotten, determined only to retain her dominance, damning to an eternity of torture any who refuse to bend the knee.



The Hydra began life in the belly of a man - the cruel and merciless master of the pits, a slaver and tormenter whose appetite for slaughter propelled him to the head of a veritable empire of organised brutality. This man suffered a notorious death at the hands of the one who would come to be known as the Death Knight, in the first act of violence to set in motion the Great Pit Rebellion. On that day, after all others had fled the blood-spattered arena, a solitary figure slipped in from the shadows with singular purpose – the Beastmaster.

Enacting his dark ritual over the remains of the slaughtered pit-boss, the Beastmaster summoned forth the man's beast-form, confident of recruiting it into his army of deathly shadows like so many before it. However, there are some beast-forms so wretched and powerful they obey no-one, not even the Beastmaster, not even the wielder of the hallowed Shadow Trident. It is said that many of the most grotesque horrors of the castle depths are those which the Beastmaster has brought into being and been unable to contain. This was one such occasion.

As the dark smoke of the spirit rose high into the air, there seemed no end to it. At length it coiled together and took on a gigantic, serpentine form, immediately lunging to devour the man who had summoned it, seemingly heedless of the magic he wielded. The Beastmaster barely escaped with his life, forcing the newly birthed creature back with the power of the Shadow Trident - just enough to make good his escape. Having slipped free of the bonds of the flesh, the spirit-beast ran rampant, marauding through the castle depths, shadow to shadow, sustaining itself by feeding on the souls of mortals – leaving in its wake a trail of mutilated corpses.

With every kill the shadow-creature made, a soul was absorbed into its essence until the beast became so heavy, so overflowing with enslaved souls that the very fabric of the spirit plane ruptured under its weight. Passing through this momentary rent in reality, the creature writhed and screeched, forced into physical form by the transition. A spectral wind swept through the castle and countless corpses and cadavers were stripped of their skin and meat – a wave of repulsive remains skittering over the cold flagstones to be added to the screaming manifestation of this serpentine destroyer.

The Hydra was born, an abomination the likes of which the castle had never seen: A giant, many-headed snake possessed of all the deadly speed, accuracy and venom of the most lethal earthly serpent, feeding insatiably to sustain its impossible existence as it grows ever stronger, ever larger. Cut off one of its heads and another will immediately sprout to take its place, the new growth fuelled by a soul rushing up from its belly, the new head bearing some grotesque resemblance to the face of the original victim, now a slave to the beast. Even the mind of its prey persists within the Hydra, yet twisted, distorted in its fusion with the many minds of the whole – together bent to propel the creature onwards, overcome with the primal will to hunt, feed, endure.



In a time long ago, a great many monsters roamed the impossible vastness of the expanse - brutish creatures of a size and power beyond our capacity to imagine. For reasons we could never understand, one such monster, the vile demon Zalligrab, fell afoul of the strange phenomenon known as The Entity. Its thick hide sizzled and burned under the lash of The Entity's tendrils as it was drawn slowly but surely into the void at its core. There, Zalligrab was obliterated, shredded as he tumbled through a vortex of space and time, gory chunks of his remains eventually spattering through a portal to our world and coming to rest in a stone chamber somewhere in the castle depths.

Ages passed, and the remains of Zalligrab festered undisturbed. But even in this ruined state, the creature from beyond our plane had brought something foul into the castle, something not meant for this world. Deep within the rotting pile of cosmic gore, it was stirring, breeding and multiplying - becoming strong. In time, a dark hand passed through the chamber, giving form to the festering mound - and so arose the one they call The Plague Lord.

He is the very embodiment of disease. From his lair, the vile plague emanates, filling the castle passages with its toxins and readily finding carriers among the disgusting population who dwell within. In turn, their vile habits spread it further still, and now there are few areas of the castle untouched by the foul ravages of this most abominable plague.

These carriers suffer one of two fates. Most are corrupted from within, first beginning to cough up thick, black bile as their body becomes

riddled with sores - here dry and flaky, there slick with weeping pus. Then, large abscesses form under their arms and in their groins, slowly crippling their movement until, at the very last they can only crawl - leaving a dark ooze in their wake as parts of their blackened flesh begin to slide from the bone like well-roasted meat.

However, there are those rare recipients into whom some strain of Zalligrab's strength appears to pass when the infection takes hold. Though their flesh falls away and their mind becomes corrupted, they are not weakened by their degradation. These are the true followers of the Plague Lord, his lieutenants, his generals - foot soldiers making up the ranks of his foetid armies. Periodically they flock to him to re-energise, drawing deep of his immortal, pustulent strength, basking and worshipping at the rancid source of their infection before once again dispersing to spread the disease ever further. In this way, for as long as the Plague Lord lives, the castle will never be free of plague.



The Demented Priestess

Eleanor began life in the sweet lap of luxury. The daughter of a wealthy merchant, she wanted for nothing. Her education was conducted by the greatest scholars of the realm and as the years went on she bloomed into one of the finest women the village had known. Upon reaching maturity, she became disgusted by her father's wealth and swore an oath to follow a different path. Against their loving wishes, she left the family and took the cloth.

Eleanor the priestess was welcomed gladly into the arms of the faith. Her keen mind, her deep love of reading, and her predisposition towards a simple way of life saw her settle well into her new vocation. She read more than any of her peers, prayed longer, sacrificed more severely. Over many days of penitence, she became an untouchable example of purity and grace – all seemed to agree it was only a matter of time before she would assume the post of Abbess.

It was about this time, some believe, that the dreams began. In her personal writings, some of which survived the purge and remain in the possession of the clergy to this day, came the first mention of 'the spirit of darkness'. Quite suddenly, the priestess began to request forbidden texts from the library. She grew lax in her duties and was often seen wandering the woodland in the full blackness of night. On one occasion, she went missing only to be found many days later in a near fatal state of dehydration, deep in the catacombs of the abbey, avidly poring over the pages of runic texts with the last of her strength.

It became clear to her peers that her mind had been taken, though by what exactly they could not say. They feared the woman they so loved might never recover – that her spirit had joined with darkness and

might not return to them unless they took immediate action. So, they gathered to confront her and, on finding the door to her chambers barred, broke it down. The priestess was not there. All of the doors and windows were sealed, yet somehow she had long since fled, leaving her chamber adorned with strange symbols and crude depictions of wholly despicable acts. The room was cleaned, and all record of the priestess purged. The order forbade the very mention of her name and tried their best to forget her fall from grace. Yet as many feared, this was not to be the end of the story.

Reports trickled into the village of a new congregation, a shadowy society that met in secret. All manner of strange and unnatural crimes became attributed to members of this sect, and a plot was formed against them. A brave priest infiltrated their number, posing as a simple farmer. He grew in their trust, debasing himself for the good of his parishioners, determined to seek out the source of this twisted new faith. One night he was granted the privilege of joining a woodland ritual – the details of which were so foul he never did recount them in detail. After departing from the forest clearing, the worshippers had travelled to a black castle, a place of such immense proportions as to be all but indescribable, a structure imbued with such an immense aura of evil that the priest, on returning breathless to the village, went half-mad in the recalling of it.

It is said that the Priestess preaches still, her dark cathedral buried deep within the castle walls, her demented sermons a terrifying mix of incomprehensible madness and explicit guidance in the execution of unspeakable evil. There, to those fetid depths, her followers flock in droves, gibbering under their robes, never hesitating to wield deadly violence in the fierce defence of their right to carry out her hallowed instructions.



For as long as there has been a castle, there has been a Player, and for as long as there has been a Player, so has there been a castle.

- Words of ancient wisdom

Among all the many thousands who live and die within the castle walls, there are none who do not ascribe some meaning to the name 'The Player of Games'. To some, it is a merely a term for fate, for chance - a curse cried out at the onset of some great misfortune, some instance of bad luck: "Damn the player, and damn the game!"

To others, the Player of Games is much more. She is understood as a kind of god, an overseer to whom prayers are offered and daily sacrifices are made. They hold a deep belief that even their most vile wishes might come to pass if only they can pay sufficient fealty to the Player. In this way are great brutalities carried out, unthinkable atrocities perpetrated - all in the hope of appeasing the Player, that she might aid them in achieving the even deeper, darker depths of their own depravity.

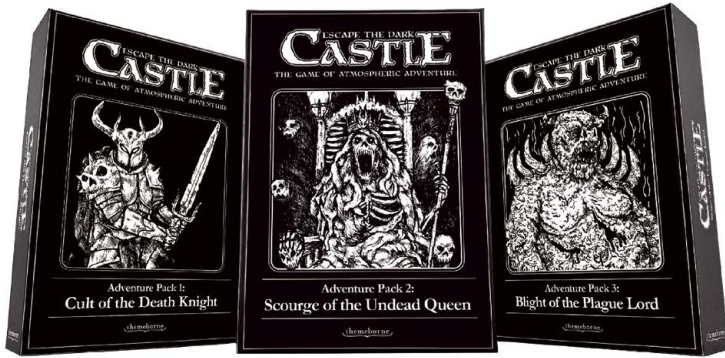
Others denounce this manner of worship as pointless, and yet their own beliefs are equally wild. As they huddle together in the depths of night, swapping stories by the flicker of their dying fires, they whisper tales equally as outlandish - that the entire castle and all the land of the surrounding realm is merely a figment of The Player's imagination; that everything which happens does so according to her will; that she cannot be appeased; that we are mere toys to amuse her. To them,

their entire world exists within a glass orb, and is one of countless others like it, arranged neatly on the shelves of her vast library of worlds.

Other voices proclaim her a witch, a real woman of flesh and blood but possessed of The Sight, granted by some dark pact the ability to distend her mind, to reach into the fabric of time and experience the past, the future - to slip between dimensions and in doing so alter the very structure of the universe. Yet others still insist she exists at the whim of some higher, unnamed power, always bound to return to her mortal frame, forever in fear of straying too far for too long lest her own consciousness should perish.

Whatever the truth, all agree that she is seldom seen in physical form - even while her dark influence exerts its presence all around us. Whenever the strange, black mist rises in the outlying lands, she is there. When the roll of thunder shakes the castle walls, she is there. When bolts of lightning strike the towers in a blinding flash of light, when a cold wind blows through your chamber at night - she is there too. In this way she moves her hand within our world. These are the manifestations of her presence, the shape of her influence as it acts upon our lives, and so it will be, in this life and the next - and so should you always fear her.

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