

Chapter 1: Along the Willow Road

The man was heavy and huffed mightily as he walked. In one hand he held a worn walking stick of alderwood, the sweet smell long faded. In the other, a handkerchief that he used to mop the sweat from his glistening brow. Despite his ponderous belly, his stiff-legged walk carried him quickly. The smooth track was well worn with travel and crowded on either side by abundant meadow grass. He wore a dull blue tunic with grease stains down the front, some still fresh the day's meal. His thick forearms were nearly hairless, his hands beefy and calloused. He wore a light hood to protect his balding crown from the rays of the sun. He had a thick smell, a mixture of sweat, earth, and leather.

By his side was a stick of a lad with an unkempt mop of hair that required constant attention to keep out his eyes. The pace they traveled was so quick that the lad had to burst into short runs to keep up. He wore patched sandals that needed replacing, but his feet were thick with walking and he paid them no mind. The boy was dressed in a long tunic, the sleeves and hem too long for his frame. He'd grow into it by next winter. It was belted with a simple cord of leather with a few worthless trinkets roped in the weave, the youthful fancies of an innocent eye.

It would have surprised the casual observer to know that the pair was father and son. Orsam the Cottar and his son, Liam, were returning from Medelune after a day of digging in Hovan's furrow. The sun was resting just above the line of willows, offering the final warmth of the day before the arrival of the night chill. As they walked, Orsam puffed out stories and tellings of the world as he knew it to his son.

"We keep at this rate and we'll arrive home 'ere sundown." They stopped earlier along the river and picked a few handfuls of flat leaf crispum to chew on their walk. Orsam offered Liam another bunch, which was obligingly accepted. "Be sure to eat that before talking to the lasses, boy. The ladies do not take to foul breath."

Liam responded as any boy of ten summers might, with a grimace and a roll of his eyes. He was old enough to realize that girls were different, but not yet old enough to discover how or why.

"What now then," Orsam asked as he wiped the sweat from his face. Though he was a large man, Orsam worked like a draft horse and his energies had always provided a full table and warm fire for his family. The son thought for a moment, lagged behind, and then galloped up to the side of his father with his answer.

"Tell me of Raighans Ride." The ride was the high road of worked stone from Arusador, city of the baron. It ran south and north to even larger cities. Liam had asked this question before, several times in fact, but occasionally his father had new tales to tell from the taproom of the Four Corners in Medelune.

"Ah, lad, your head is still filled with fancy," Orsam was worried about his boy. Ever since last summer when those boys, barely of age, had the village left with swords on their belts and foolishness in their heads, every lad had visions of becoming a dragon slayer. Still, after the passing of his wife, Orsam could never deny his son's requests. "Well ... let's see ... there was talk of the Red Leggers, but you heard that one ..." A deep pant. "... and then there was the mention of the Lord and his white steed." Seeing the boy's face light up, Orsam decided to continued with his tale.

"From his tower in Arusador, Lord Abelaine searches the land for many a great and worthy deed, befitting a warrior of his stature." Orsam said in a dramatic style, extending his handkerchief for grand effect. "Well, as it is ... Velon the Monger says the bards of Arusador are singing of his deeds from this spring. The Lord upon his white steed found a maid in harm's way, beset by highwayman of caddish intent. With noble lance held high, he charged into their midst killing a score of them in one pass." Orsam brought his alderwood stick to his chest as a mock lance and galloped forward. He called over his shoulder to his surprised son. "How will Lord Abelaine win the day without his trusty squire?"

"Here I am!" The boy squealed with joy and started into a run to join his father.

"A dozen more fell before the thunderous hooves of his great stallion until a cowardly foe pulled the Lord from his horse with a hangman's noose." Orsam tumbled down grabbing his neck in feigned distress. Lying on the ground in a cloud of dust with his son, he bellowed on. "They thought the great Lord defeated, they thought his will was weak! But alas, no! He rose from the dust and blood and drew his fearsome blade!" Back to their feet, staff now held with two hands as a mighty sword. "With each swing of his blade, more of the vile foe fell until there were but none. And then upon one knee, Lord Abelaine offered his hand to the fair lady, saying only 'may I be of service.'"

Hopping from one foot to the other and clapping his hands, Liam chimed in, "that's what he always says!" Orsam pushed himself up from his kneeling position with his staff and absent mindedly, and mostly ineffectively, dusted off his breeches and tunic.

"Well ... well of course, lad ... that's true virtue." Orsam put his large hand on his son's narrow shoulder with a smile. With a glance down the road, he noticed an approaching horse and his face became quizzical. Together they walked to the top of the next bluff to catch a better view. Orsam chided himself silently for actually thinking that it might be Lord Abelaine, it was a smallish bay horse. Still it could be a courier to Medelune and as such they ought to pay the proper respects. He pointed to the side of the road, where he and his son took their position to dutifully wait for the rider to pass.

"Do not look him in the eye, son." Orsam whispered, knowing his Liam's curiosity might get the better of him. As the horse approached, it became apparent that there was no rider. Deference turned to concern. "Stay right here," he said in his father voice, the tone of authority, and moved to intercept the horse.

It was saddled with fine leather. The cantle was pressed with intricate knot work and silver stirrup irons hung from the sides. Even more impressive to Orsam, the horse wore a bradoon. It was a double bridle worked through two bits in the horse's mouth for perfect control over every movement. Only master rider would use tack such as this. Looking back down the road, there was still no sign of its owner. The horse was flushed and nervously eyeing the heavy man before it.

With a growing chill in his stomach, Orsam looked around the trees as calmly as he could manage without appearing nervous before his son. Stuffing his handkerchief into his struggling leather belt, he took the reins of the horse gently in one hand. As a cottar, he was familiar enough with every type of animal under the employ of man, though never a horse this fine. He turned back to Liam, noting with a muted degree of satisfaction that the boy had kept quiet and had not moved a muscle.

"There is something amiss, boy" he said, slowly looking into the dimming edge of the willows again. "The reeve will know action must be taken. We're going back to Medelune."

Chapter 2: A Horse With No Name

Nestor walked back into the brooding taproom with refreshed mugs of his foulest brew, which he secretly referred to as Muck Water. It was a common ale, not spiced, that he made from a patch of wild sour wheat last summer, no doubt made worse for its closeness to Cawley's mule barn. After pouring the finely powdered grist in his mash pot and sealing it, Nestor kept the pot cooler than the others, slowing the fermentation process. The wort, as well as the resulting ale, was flat, sour, and dry. He had left the concoction in his cellar for a time such as this, when he felt the need to encourage his patrons to stop drinking. Just part of an innkeeper's secrets.

The collection of elders was a somber lot, partly due to the flat ale, but mostly on account of the news brought by Orsam the Cottar. The lonely bay horse was resting peacefully in the shed after being fed and brushed by Nestor's eldest. The fine leather saddle was put in the loft for safe keeping, covered with a burlap tarp. Orsam leaned nervously against a wall, Liam beside him and fast asleep on a smooth bench. The elders sat in a rough circle of chairs in the middle of the taproom with a low fire softening a few pearmain in a sugar beet sauce. Nestor sighed again as he unloaded his tray for the others. As always, the deliberations of the elders required bellies full of food and spirits. No one bothered to consider that it was at the brewer's expense. The next round, he had decided wryly, would be one part well water.

Inclusion on the council was a simple matter. The oldest person of any important profession or craft was considered an elder. As the only brewer and owner of the Four Corners, Nestor was a natural selection despite his young age of forty seasons. His inn and hospitality served as a fine meeting hall. The others included the smith, the tanner, the miller, and so forth for a total of eight elders. The council consisted of nine total, the last being the reeve, the baron's representative in Medelune. Master Alvaius the Reeve was from Arusador and well traveled. Though he was not truly a master of anything, the villagers of Medelune insisted on adding the title as a courtesy of his baronial appointment. And, much to their delight, he played a proficient mandolin.

Regardless of the topic, the meetings were much the same as ever. Whether interpreting possible omens from a horse born lame or nominating an axe thrower for the yearly Hamperdown Faire, the meeting was concerned primarily with the intrigue of local gossip. At the final point of decision, the elders would quiet and wait for the reeve to make a final judgment. Though Alvaius lived in one of the smallest houses in the village proper and had not returned to the Arusador court in over five years, he wore the badge of the baron and in Medelune that was enough. On important matters, the reeve had learned to speak to the elders individually to learn their thoughts. Unfortunately, at this late hour there was no time for such luxury.

Alvaius sat reversed in his chair, his posterior warm from the fire and one arm resting over the chair back. He looked at the elders before him and puffed on his thin pipe. Kinnon the Farmer lived far from the village walls and had not been summoned at such a late hour, leaving the council one short. After each pull on his pipe, Alvaius would let the smoke drift from his mouth and then lick the sweet residue from his lips. Though he was not a

village elder, the reeve was certainly old enough to join their ranks. He had seen well more than fifty cycles across three different kingdoms. His murky blue eyes hinted at his travels.

"Branwyn's found her self with child again." The silence was broken by Ruadri, the sheep herder. Branwyn was a treasured source of discussion for the elder council. Her husband had left for the city as a footman five summers ago on the baron's levy and she had been pregnant three times already in his absence. The mood did not lift and Ruadri glanced back to the floor. There would be no idle gossip on this day. A few moments of silence passed until Alvaius spoke.

"The horse is assuredly from Arusador," he spoke to no one in particular as he watched his pipe smoke curl into the rafters. "Though the markings of the saddle, I do not know. The rider's intended destination is also unknown. There are four other villages upon the Willow Road." Another puff and exhale. "It would not be wise to send a man along that track without knowing what dangers befell the rider. We cannot alert Arusador until then." The elders nodded in agreement.

"Ruadri, good fellow, perhaps you should meet with our absent brother tomorrow and have word spread through the steads and farms to be wary and at guard." Ruadri nodded and put down his tankard of sour ale, realizing that his task as well as his herding would start at first light. In the dimness, Nestor smiled.

"A fine notion, Master Alvaius," added Erwan, blacksmith. The rest shared their agreement.

"Jowan, may I also impose a request upon you?" Alvaius turned to the miller, the other elder present whose affairs would naturally take him out of the village.

"I am your servant, reeve."

Nodding his appreciation, Alvaius continued. "There are homes on the way to your mill that have absent masters, such as Garazin and his boy. If there still be light tomorrow after the labor of the day, might chance you a look at their gates and see that they are unmolested?"

"It will be done."

Alvaius had saved the most portentous task for himself. "I shall call upon the wizard's tower on the morrow and see what wisdom he chooses to share with us. I do not intend to be away for long, but Gelveled will manage in my absence." Gelveled was a barrel-chested man and leader of the village guard and militia. He was also the best wrestler in the five villages, a crowd favorite at Hamperdown. The naming of a successor did not escape the notice of the taproom's guests.

"And for the last of our tasks, I would entreat you, Orsam, to come forth." The cottar straightened and entered the ring of chairs and bowed slightly before the reeve. Though courtly etiquette, well known to only Alvaius, did not require such a display, the reeve respected the villagers' sense of modesty and loyalty. With a kind eye, Alvaius addressed the large man before him. "You live nearest the Whispering Wood as any man of Medelune. Pray you might call upon the Wren to join us within our oak tree walls for counsel?"

Orsam knew of the man known as the Wren as well as anyone with an ear for tales over mead might, but he also knew where that one sometimes called home. It was within the Whispering Wood, an ancient place where secrets of older days were kept. As a cottar, he was used to do filling his time with odd chores for others. Orsam was aware of the subtlety that Alvaius had used by mentioning that he would see the wizard, the most dreaded of all the tasks, before asking the final only slightly less dreadful favor of him. He also realized that he was the best suited for the assignment and could not refuse.

"I shall do as you and the village elders ask, Master Alvaius." He bowed again and the meeting ended. Orsam stopped by his sleeping son and gently tussled his hair. He left leaning against the wall the alderwood lance from stories earlier in the day for his son to find upon his wake.

Chapter 3: The Home of Hobsen

The Whispering Wood stood before Orsam, silent and majestic. Though the day was warm, he pulled his wool cloak close. He was standing at the end of his well path. The well was a ring of mortared mudstone, roughly waist high, with a banded well cover of pinewood. The well had existed for ages, but it was Orsam that had built the mudstone fixture and refreshed the wickerwork sidings. The water pulled from the well was surprisingly clear, likely from an underground spring. It was this source of pure water that had led Orsam to the discovery of his neighbor, the Wren.

Two springs ago, Orsam was kneeling in the dark dirt next to the well and refastening the binding of his well cover, when he appeared. He was carrying three deeps buckets. Slung over his shoulder was a massive bow with a hip mounted quiver of brightly fletched arrows. Orsam was dumb-founded, expecting the man to fire an arrow through him at any moment. Instead, the man called Wren walked over and dipped each of his three buckets methodically into the well with the links of chain attached to the mudstone base. When he was finished, the Wren picked up his three buckets and simply walked back into the forest.

Orsam blinked in disbelief as he did on that day, sometimes doubting if it had actually happened. Though most of the villagers of Medelune that did not live in the village proper lived in the woodlands, no one lived in the forests. And no one ventured into the Whispering Wood especially, the forest west of Medelune, beyond the lake of the Heath Glen. It was an instinct that man possessed when entered a place that was not designed for his passage. Something within this forest was watching and the whispering often heard through the hardwoods was a warning. Clutching his cloak, Orsam pushed past the thick branches of the pine trees that served as a gate and stepped into the Wood.

The interior of the forest was dim, the thick canopy of tall trees blocking most of the sunlight from the forest floor. A soft bed of moist leaves, creepers, and ferns covered the ground. The terrain was a bumpy mix of hillocks and occasional gullies with thick undergrowth and towering trees. Orsam carefully waded through the range of periwinkle, blooming with delicate purple flowers just below his knees. He determined that the Wren could not live far into the forest, carrying three sloppy buckets as he did over these rises.

To his luck, Orsam spotted what appeared to be an abandoned game trail and hopped in awkward strides through the shrub growth to get to it. Tracing its destination with his eyes, he determined that it exited the forest approximately where the mudstone well was located and decided to follow the opposite course in the hopes of finding the home of the mysterious woodsman. Up and over, down and under, across and over as Orsam made his way through the knolls, thick trees, and shallow streams. At last he spotted a dwelling, a simple cottage with a poorly thatched roof with half a dozen curing rabbit skins hanging about.

Quickly using his hands, Orsam straightened and pressed his tunic and hood into some appearance of civility and followed the game trail to the cottage. Coming closer to the structure, he noticed that in fact it had no front door only a ragged sheet hanging in the entry frame. There was a deep fire pit ringed with blacked flint stones. Orsam twisted his mouth in vexation, his eyes flitting around nervously. As he listened, the gently breeze passing through the pine, birch, and oak forest started to softly whisper. The interior of the cottage was dark, ominous. The cottar pulled out a small hatchet that he had picked up from his home on the way to complete his mission. The sweat that typically covered his brow had turned to ice and this small tool was his only means of defense.

"Planning to attend some woodworking?" The voice floated down from the branches. As Orsam whirled in surprise to the source, he saw the Wren reclining on a high branch with his bow laid across his lap. He wore a green cloak with a deep hood and a russet colored tunic. His boots were high, to the knee, and bound with thick cord throughout. Orsam sheepishly returned his hatchet to his belt and bowed.

"Milord, I come on behalf of Medelune," Orsam stated in earnest.

"Do not call me that." The man swung down from the branch and landed softly with a few steps. "That title fits me as well as your tunic might."

"Then, pray may I ask, good sir, what I shall address you as? Do you prefer to be known as the Wren?"

"No," he snorted with a chuckle. "Only you villagers call me that. If you must address me, you may use Hobsen, if you like." Hobsen's ancestry was well known to Medelune. His father, Hob the Bram, was a notorious bandit and thief. Only through his service during the goblin war, did Hob the elder save his neck from the axe. Afterwards, he disappeared for good into the Whispering Wood to raise his young son.

"Then let me say again, good Hobsen, that Medelune requests your counsel." Orsam bowed again.

"Forsooth." Hobsen mutely cursed. He was eyeing his humble dwelling and ticking off the things he had been planning to do with the rest of the day. The son of Hob was a man of two worlds. He was at one with the ancient forest, a hunter and woodsman. Yet at the same time, he was a man and his people deserved his ear if nothing else. After all, the cottar, his unknowing neighbor, had dared the Whispering Wood to find him. He would go.

"Tell me the nature of this request?"

"Perhaps, it would not be wise for me to say." Orsam bowed again. "I am an unlearned man and have not the sweetness of speech. I would hold myself unforgivable if I misrepresented the desires of the elders and the reeve." Hobsen expected an answer as such.

He stepped past the curtain and into his cottage and retrieved a slender blade, barely the length of his arm. Orsam's eyes widened, it was rare for him to be in the company of a man bearing arms, a distinctly uncomfortable feeling. The sword was wrapped in a leather sheath with the same cord bindings as his boots. He also grabbed a sack with a shoulder strap and two bulging skins.

"Please, as you have found my home, I beseech you to lead me to Medelune." Orsam wrapped his cloak around him and started back down the game trail. Hobsen had not bothered to ask his name and Orsam was a bit perturbed by it. Though he was only a cottar and a now serving as a courier, manners would seem to dictate that courtesy. After all, they were neighbors. Hobsen, on the other hand, did not care much for names. There was no need for them in the Whispering Wood.

Chapter 4: Another Round At The Four Corners

The walk back to Medelune had been uncomfortable for Orsam. Hobsen had this strange ability to always know when Orsam was looking at him. Each time the cottar tried to sneak a glance at his companion, the woodsman was ready to meet his gaze. It was apparent, as well, that he preferred to travel in silence. Occasionally, he would stop and listen to the sounds of the forest, show a knowing smile, and then continue. In such a manner, they walked back to the village.

The trees of Medelune were just visible over the horizon and Hobsen's grey eyes soaked in their magnificence. Unknown to the men that had settled on this site over two hundred cycles ago, the hill upon which Medelune was built was an enchanted place. Whatever spirits or powers that once held dominion over this land had retreated long ago into the ominous shadows of the wood. Those forefathers, as with the men of today, heard the whispers in the brooding forests and heeded their warning. Hobsen had crossed that invisible barrier and many of the secrets of this land were known to him. And still many were not.

The back of the village faced an impressive bluff overlooking a small, but deep lake surrounded by heathland. The northern and southern edges were protected by a dense wall of massive trees, creating a naturally sheltered grotto. Each side climbed a hundred feet into the air before the thick branches spawned out in every direction, topping two hundred feet in height at the zenith. The trees were a variety of hardwood called Yarnwood with flowering amber leaves. These ancient trees, well preserved in legend and lore for their thickly growing bark, could repel arrowheads like armor.

The clever villagers had added archer galleries through the thick branches of the Yarnwoods to serve as covered ramparts. The archers nest also provided a commanding view of the landscape for miles. Completing the protective barrier, the settlers had also built a low wall of stone and wood, complete with a gatehouse. It was connected to the tree ramparts through sheltered ladders on either side. Though these defensive measures seemed preposterous at the time they were constructed, they had proven invaluable during the goblin war twenty winters previous. Medelune had been spared the worst, unlike the neighboring village of Barnwall. Many a young man had found his untimely end upon a goblin spear in those bloody months of autumn.

Outside of the village, misplaced willows and the infrequent birch shaded the worn earth from the walls to the tree line. Unlike over walled settlements, Medelune had no buildings just outside the walls. Instead, they lived scattered throughout the eastern woodland in fortified homesteads. Within the walls, the village proper was a tightly packed mix of low, thatched houses. The largest building was Nestor's Four Corners Inn, which was built on a broad foundation of dark stone, which predated the village.

Hobsen and Orsam entered the village walls and walked to the Four Corners. Wearing a bow and sword attracted many concerned looks and murmurs, but the woodsman paid it no heed. Nestor was on the flat stone veranda leading into his inn, drying his hands with a towel as they approached. With a nod to his eldest, the council would be summoned immediately. Instead of clearing his taproom for a meeting of such importance, they would meet in the cramped cookery in the back. His wife was already preparing a small meal of ground barley boiled in sheep fat with chopped onion. It was a local treat that had been passed down for generations in her family, not even his brother, the innkeeper in Westwell, knew the recipe.

The woodsman stopped short of the veranda and waited for an invitation to enter from the inn's proprietor, which was quickly given. Nestor had seen Hobsen before, but never this close. He was surprised at how young the man looked, barely old enough to grow a proper winter beard. Yet those grey eyes spoke volumes of untold discovery and the sword at his waist told its own story.

"Greetings, Wren," Nestor cordially offered his hand as only an innkeeper might. Hobsen smiled sideways at Orsam, who stammered for a moment before the words came out.

"Fine innkeeper, our friend has asked to be known as Hobsen," Orsam bowed as he always did. Nestor caught what Orsam had not. The young man before him had arrived with supercilious intent. They would address him as the son of the villain that had so troubled Medelune in days past before bowing to their requests to use his skills of stealth and banditry to save it. And now the fathers of Medelune were calling for aid from the next generation. Were it not for Master Alvaius and the troubling situation to which they found themselves, Nestor decided he would have turned the man away. All of this flashed through his mind and only a slight pause in his smile betrayed his hesitations.

"Ah, of course, fine sir." Nestor clasped him on the shoulder and guided him into the taproom as he spoke. "Hobsen it shall be then. A man of his own destiny and bearings, just as his father before." Nestor was pleased to see Hobsen's jaw tighten at his riposte. "Please, accept the warmth from my fire and from my spirits as we await the elders to gather." Nestor walked to the back of his inn to let the woodsman and Orsam sit awkwardly in silence at a table near the empty stage. The lad should know better than to match wits with a taverner.

In quick succession, the village elders arrived and greeted the son of Hob the Bram. Still burning inside from the remarks of the innkeeper, Hobsen had learned that wordplay was not his craft and he allowed the council to call him Wren and Hobsen interchangeably without correction. The meeting was called to order in the cookery with Nestor's wife quietly scooping portions of her secret recipe, known simply as Hertril's pottage, with a fat wooden spoon. Nestor had seen that the tankards were full of sweeter ale than before. Despite his sardonic manner, Hobsen was a pathfinder and could someday solicit the ear of a future patron.

"Master Wren," Alvaius began, fingering his belt for the pipe that he had forgotten upon his mantle. "Be assured that we would not have disturbed you without cause. 'Tis a matter of serious consideration, a man's life is in peril."

"I am here to listen and offer what assistance I may."

"It pleases me greatly to hear that," Alvaius stopped to savor the mouthful of Hertril's pottage for a blissful moment. "A riderless horse came upon us, found by Orsam the Cottar. It is undoubtedly the possession of a man of title. Word must be sent to Arusador of this occurrence, yet we dare not send a courier until we know the path is clear. We have taken what precautions we may to ensure that the fair people of Medelune are protected. I have called upon the sorcerer's tower personally, as well, though to no avail. All considerations and avenues have been considered before our request for your counsel. I assure you of this in good faith."

"Master Alvaius, speak your request freely." Hobsen stated flatly. It was hot in this cookery, especially with all the eager eyes upon him. The silver tongues of these villagers were turning his stomach against him. He wished to be on his way as quickly as possible.

"Of course, master woodsman," Alvaius set his bowl aside. "We have not the skills in the wild that you possess, nor the strength of arms. For these reasons, I am asking for your aid. To state things plainly, I would ask that you help us unravel this mystery and, gods willing, per chance save the life of this lost gentleman."

"Master Alvaius ..." Hobsen stood immediately. "I accept your charge. Look for me at your gates four days hence. I leave immediately." With a few nimble steps, Hobsen danced his way past the cluster of seated elders and was beyond the door and village gates in a flash.

Chapter 5: To Look Upon the Wood With Grey Eyes

The back legs of the hare twitched with nervous energy, prepared to race into the thick hedge only a meter away at the first sign of danger. Its exceptionally long ears were cocked at different angles, probing the air for an odd sound. With its sleek body and wiry muscles, it could easily outpace a horse in short bursts. The shy animal relied solely upon this extraordinary quickness and its keen senses for survival. Hearing nothing to send it fleeing into the brush, the small brown hare contentedly nibbled on a patch of timothy-grass.

Hiding forty paces away, wrapped around the trunk of a thickly growing silver birch, the woodsman stood with his bow aimed tightly at the small animal. His forward arm was tensed with the heavy draw, sharply cut into rigid muscles. His green cloak mixed naturally with the brightly colored branches around him and his grey eyes melded into the shadow of his hood. The arrow nocked in his bow of yew had a sleek head and would easily pass through the target, pinning it to the ground. Hobsen waited for the kill with extreme patience. In his patience, the hunter could wait for days if needed, as silent and still as the forest around him.

These small creatures were abundant this summer, which to Hobsen held portentous omens. The red foxes of these woods, the natural predator of the hare, were greatly down in their numbers allowing their prey to flourish. The tracks he had found further north had confirmed his suspicions. The goblins and their warg steeds were

roaming further and further into the Whispering Woods in growing confidence. The wargs were massive wolves, nearly as large as a pony, and they were feeding on the smaller predators. Goblin warriors roaming the wood with greater frequency could only mean that their numbers were strong again within the abyssal depths of Tarren Nos. It was all part of the natural cycle, Hobsen knew, a growing population had to either expand or retract, find more food or lose mouths to feed. There would blood again in the coming autumn and that knowledge left a chill in Hobsen's stomach.

It was time to take his meal. He let out a low whistle, barely audible to human ears. The hare turned toward the sound and Hobsen caught its eyes with his own. For a moment, its body tensed to fleet. His grey eyes were depthless and mesmerizing. Slowly he began speaking the words his father had taught him as a boy. It was the language of the forest, ancient and sacred, *Can Daer*. The prey knew its danger, yet could not run. Few could wield the forest tongue as Hobsen could, mortal or otherwise. It gave him mastery over all creatures of the wood,

In moments, the woodsman was using his stout knife to clean his kill. During such routine chores, his thoughts wandered. He decided to let the dilemma of Tarren Nos recede to the back of his mind and once again he turned his attention to the missing rider. He had been searching through the woodland all morning as well as the day before. The Willow Road and the countless other horse and wagon trails that intersected it revealed nothing out of the ordinary. As he searched, Hobsen had pulled tasty wild herbs from the ground and plucked plump fruits from low branches to satisfy his hunger as he went. He had found the hare and decided to spare an arrowhead for his dinner. There were other days when meat had not been so available and eating the same timothy-grass as his prey was the only choice to stave off starvation. Again, it was nature's way.

He was far from Medelune and starting to doubt his luck of discovering any evidence of the rider. The hare was prepared and he bound it carefully into a leather wrap and placed it in his shoulder bag. With a stretch, he scanned the sky and noticed the slow circle of a hooded vulture, low over the tree tops. The bird was a scavenger, finding on carrion on which to feed with its keen eyes. It was either waiting for some animal in obvious torment to finally die or for a larger scavenger to leave, so it could take its turn to feed. From his best judgment, the center of the circle of flight was just beyond the hills on the horizon. Knowing these lands as well as he did, Hobsen recalled an old bridge crossing a rocky gully near that area. It held possibilities and he slung his bow over his shoulder as he darted silently through the woods in that direction.

He arrived quickly and took a few moments secretly observe his surroundings. Hobsen was exceptional in his ability to cross overland terrain, easily traversing three leagues in under an hour. He looked out at the ancient bridge arching over the stream in the crag below. The bridge was sturdily built of stone with worn baronial markings carved into each of the abutments. Hobsen left the cover of the foliage and stepped onto the track, dug deep with wagon ruts. With a quick study, he determined there were no tracks of interest in the firm soil and he moved cautiously to the bridge. Where there was carrion, there was likely something willing to protect its food. He pulled his green cloak away from his sword hilt with his off hand.

Stepping onto the bridge, he methodically looked down into the gully from each side, scanning for any signs or disturbance. He saw nothing in the gully below. The stream was slow moving and filled with fetid water that left a thick smell in his nostrils. The vulture in the sky had disappeared; perhaps his arrival had frightened it away. He sighed and was about to venture into the forest for firewood for his evening meal, when he noticed a cloud of blow

flies in the woods above the gully edge further into the wood. The flies were thick and active. Hobsen steeled himself for what his discovery may hold.

Pulling his sword, slender and short for the confines of the forest, Hobsen moved to the buzzing cluster. His fears were confirmed when he saw the heel of a leather boot barely visible under a thick patch of heather. As he approached, Hobsen saw the grisly remains of the rider. The body was rigid with rigor mortis and covered in mud and leaves. The death had been a painful one judging from the broad crimson stains on the back of the tunic. He was dressed as a courtesan in finely tailored garb with intricate embroidery. The site of the dead always left him hollow. There was no nobility in death, laid bare and vulnerable to the elements and scavengers of the forest.

Still, he needed information that this fallen man could still provide. Sticking his sword point first into the ground, the woodsman kneeled next to the corpse. The wounds were deep and ragged, obviously not delivered by a bladed weapon. From their look, he determined that the deep gouges were a mix of talons and teeth. There were no drag marks into the wood from the road, so he likely died here. Or was carried, but Hobsen dismissed that as unlikely. Still there was little blood. The man had died painfully from deep wounds and his life would have poured out around him as he thrashed about in his death throes. With the wave of his hand to scatter the crawling flies, Hobsen examined the sickly white larvae crawling about in the mess before him. The rider had been dead for three days, the time for the flies to lay their eggs and for them to grow to this size. In another fortnight, these maggots would grow to adulthood and continue the reproductive cycle.

The rider's pack was cast aside, the ties still intact. Hobsen opened it and lifted the cover to peer inside. Travel gear with a bundle of food wrapped in white gauze. Stitched into the white wrap were the words *My Dearest* in flowing script. Hobsen returned his gaze back to the fallen man with a heavy heart, knowing that somewhere the heart of a woman was waiting to be broken when her love never returned from his errand. Would she remember her last glimpse, her last kiss of him? Glancing down the rest of the rider, Hobsen was surprised to note that a silver ring and a signal horn of polished bone were left. Goblins loot their victims for trophies and bounty. He was perplexed now. There were no animals within the Whispering Wood that would challenge a man on horseback and deposit him neatly in the woods to conceal his disappearance. The wounds were struck in savagery, not in hunger. Something was deeply wrong.

Hobsen stood and retrieved his sword from the ground. Using the tip of his cloak to wipe the dirt from the blade, he considered his next steps. First, he would return to Medelune to report his findings in good faith to the reeve and village elders. After that, he would venture into the deep of Aruilyn, the ancient name of the Whispering Wood, to speak to an old friend. It was the name used by the wood folk and his friend was their guardian. He stooped over the body again and pulled a sash from the belt below, embroidered with the baronial seal of Arusador, and folded in neatly into his pack. It would serve as evidence of his find.

"Fear not, fallen soul," Hobsen whispered to his silent companion as he covered the body with a folded cloak found in the abandoned pack to protect it from further indignities of nature. "Your body will rest in sacred earth." With that he left the body and tied a small white ribbon to the trunk of a nearby tree, so that others from Medelune could put this unknown courtesan to the grave with holy blessing.

Chapter 6: Eyes Bright From The Forest Dark

The day was hot, even among the shade of the ancient oaks. Emen was fair skinned and doggedly worked through the heat in his long sleeve tunic. The village girls prized a man with pale skin, a sign of craft and education. Emen was concerned with such matters. Off in the woodland somewhere, Emen's brother had no regard for such fancy. Abren was brown all over with dark freckles through his shoulders and face. He also cut his own hair, which was consistently uneven everywhere. For his efforts, Emen was quite the object of affection when the family went to Medelune for trading or feasting. Abren, on the other hand, preferred to drink ale with the farmers and talked agriculture and seasons. All the better for Emen.

Though try as he might, Emen was unable to keep the thick calluses from forming on his palms. The adze he was using to trim off the branches of the felled oak was a primary tool of his profession and it only made for rough hands. As he worked, he stacked the limbs by size in different piles. There were only two of them, so they choose smaller trees to cut and saved the trimmings for winter firewood. Abren was the stronger of the two with a will to work that was amazing. He got the timber axe most of the time, while his brother got the adze for trimming branches and the draw knife for removing bark. Even now, Emen could hear the sounds of his brother's frenzied axe strikes resound through the trees. The pair of them managed three trees a day, trimmed and delivered to Baithin's barn. Baithin, a village elder, was the carpenter and thatcher of Medelune.

They worked just outside the Whispering Wood, where the trees were pristine and beautiful. He often thought about sneaking into the forest to pull out a few Yew trees. Even hauling those trees all the way to Hamperdown's market would still be well worth the effort. It was Abren's persistence that prevailed. Their father, though too old to come to the woodland with them, had insisted since the first day that they held an axe that the Whispering Woods was to be left alone. Once Abren had set his mind to something, there was no changing it. He had earned the name the Mule among the other villagers for this dominant trait. He was fiery, stubborn, and loyal just as their father.

Once he was finished here, the second trunk of the day, Emen would finish the third, trimming and cleaning, once Abren dragged it to the path. They would tie the three trees together and put on their small wain to pull back to the carpenter's barn where they would neatly stack them. Sometimes, the good carpenter's wife gave them desserts to take back with them. Abren always saved his portion to share with their father, but Emen had a sweet tooth and gobbled it up as soon as he got it.

Emen was immediately brought out of his reverie of tarts and puddings with a low growl from the Whispering Wood to his left. It was deep, guttural, and long. Though to Emen it sounded like a wolf's growl, it had a different feel to it. It was as if the creature was not threatening him as would an animal, but instead daring him to run. An icy chill danced up his spine and set his hair on end. He gripped the adze in both hands and scanned the dim tree line. There, he spotted it. And his fear deepened to panic. All he could make out were two bright yellow eyes from beneath the shadows of a large hedge. The eyes were unblinking and returned Emen's fearful stare with knowing and pleasure.

"Abren," Emen said in a whisper. His mind was racing wildly. He needed help, yet he dare not make a sound lest he urge this beast to attack. His eyes darted around the wood searching for help or escape. The creature placed a paw into the light. It was covered in thick, mangy black fur with glossy ebon talons the size of Emen's boot knife.

It only took a simple observation to break Emen's trance and force him into a full run of horror. The paw put forth by the creature into the light had a thumb.

The scream that tore from Emen's throat as he ran was that of a child. Sheer terror and panic washed over him in frozen waves. The beast broken from its cover immediately and in huge strides quickly covered the distance to its prey. In a single leap it covered the rest and smashed Emen to the ground by his shoulders. In the landing, Emen had wriggled to his back and was swinging the adze crazily at the creature on top of him. Its hot breath stunk of death and its eyes were wild with delight. The claws dug deep into Emen's chest, snapping his right collar bone easily. The adze was hardly able to break the thick mat of fur on its ridged back. It savored the moment before striking the killing blow.

Abren broke from the trees and in two strides sent his axe end over end in a double-fisted throw. He had seen the creature leap for his younger brother. He had seen Emen forced to the ground. And now he saw his brother's lifeblood covering the claws of the beast. Abren could not feel his feet any more, only the desire to save his brother. His face twisted into his stubborn snarl as it always did when he was angry. The throw was so forceful that it carried him forward onto his face and somersaulted over in an awkward crash. The axe twirled through the air and struck the beast mightily in the rear flank. Abren was a competent axe thrower and had won a silver thistle at the Hamperdown Fair last year for his efforts.

In a howl the creature, shrieked to the sky. The axe had struck true to score a fearsome wound and bounced to the ground, spattered in the beast's dark blood. It bounded into the dark woods with a ragged roar of pain and hatred. Abren was on his feet in a flash. He ran to the tree line and screamed into the woods with his rage. The beast had fled. Now fear replacing his red haze, Abren returned to his brother's side. Emen's face was pale and his neck and shoulders wet with blood. Abren was bare-chested and freed his hanging tunic from his rope belt to wrap the wounds. The talons had pierced deeply and his bones had been crushed. Yet the bleeding was held by the thick wool tunic Emen had worn to avoid the sun.

"I knew you'd come." Emen said with tears streaking his blood smattered face. His eyes were wide in shock, yet his voice was calm. He placed his hand weakly on Abren's shoulder as his brother feverishly worked. "I knew you'd come." Abren looked to the heavens for a moment for strength and to clear his watery eyes. Then the scowl of the Mule returned and, with a forceful growl, he bit his lip until it bled. "Tell Da I love him."

With the tunic secured, Abren stood with his brother cradle and locked his iron grip around his other wrist. Though scores of axe strikes had been delivered, he knew he could run for days with his dying brother in his arms if he had too. Leaving all of their tools behind, Abren broke into a heavy jog up the path to the nearest stead he knew, Cawley the Farmer. With his brother's eyes gently closing before him as his body weakened, Abren prayed to all the gods he knew that Cawley and his mules would have a miracle.

Chapter 7: Worry And A Bit of Pipe Smoke

Alvaius was best in times such as these. Word had spread of the attack on Emen, son of Madoc the Axe, and the village was flush with fright. Coupled with the news Hobsen had delivered of the missing courier, the situation was

absolutely dire. Those that could come had packed into the village proper in a swarm of carts and tents, while the rest had barricaded themselves into their homesteads. Women with babes in arms crossed from campfire to hearth looking for news and spreading rumor. Men were worried for their families and their livelihood. An attack such as this, in the midst of day no less, could spread to the other villages and earn Medelune the moniker of cursed. Artisans, laborers, and traders alike would suffer if this were the case. Yet Alvaius the Reeve was calm for governance was gift.

Fortunately, the attack had not proven to be fatal. The young Emen was holding onto life under the care of Baithin's kindly wife. The vigil had been rough for the first night with fevers, but she had managed to prevent infection from setting into the wounds, grievous as they were. The thatcher and his four sons had barely been able to wrestle the older brother down to keep him from storming off into the Whispering Woods to fight the creature. It was the sense of king and kin that drew Alvaius to his charges. His days in the great cities had only encountered apathy and cruelty, yet here in the farthest reaches of the barony the true facets of noble character were on display.

There would be a village meeting tonight on the veranda of the Four Corners. The villagers were less deferential than the elders and it would be worsened by their fears. The reeve had called a meeting of the elders in the privacy of his home earlier in the day. There were due to start arriving at any moment. He had asked for Hobsen the Wren, Abren the Mule, and Gelveled the Marshall to attend the secret meeting, as well. Alvaius sat by his hearth, contemplating a course of action through the smoke of his pipe.

Within half an hour's time, the full assembly had arrived, including Kinnon the Farmer. Alvaius set about on business straight away. "Marshall of Medelune," he addressed Gelveled. "How are the affairs of Medelune?"

"Master Reeve," Gelveled was a soldier through and through. He had the distinction of serving through a campaign as a baronial pike man. He was tall, broad, and strongly built. His peppery hair was already graying at the temples and his eyes were ocean blue. "Those seeking sanctuary within the walls have been received and ordered. I have made sure that the new garderobes are emptied into fresh cess pits and that fire watches have been set. Our stores are good and we are bucketing in fresh water from the lake. We have archers in the galleries." He adjusted his short sword at his belt as he sat down.

"Thank you, marshall." Master Alvaius puffed once again on his pipe. "The village is in proper order. Let us turn to the matter outside of our village. To put aside fears and rumors, I will tell you what there is to know and all else will be left for the children's stories. The Wren discovered the body of the rider near the Hogal Moss Bridge. The courier was killed by a beast and then hidden in the wood. Abren, son of Madoc the Axe, saw the creature with his very eyes as it attacked his brother. He wounded it with his axe and drove it back into the wilds."

Hobsen studied Abren intently, he did not know the full account of this woodcutter and was eager to hear the beast described. To his surprise, the villager did not seem shaken or fearful from the events he had witnessed. Quite the opposite, he appeared resolute with a set jaw. Alvaius nodded at Abren to describe the creature.

"Pardon me, wisest of Medelune," Abren began unsteadily. He was more comfortable in action and not talking. "I am my father's son and have not skill at stories. The fiend was larger than a wolf and strongly built. Its hair was long and thick, like that of a boar. Its back was sharply ridged and its shoulders forward. It had the arms, and

hands even, of a man, stronger than any man I've ever seen. Stronger even than Milosh, the Tomanisch that won the stone throw last spring." The elders nodded, remembering the large gypsy man that had done well with the caber, as well. "It was the beast's head, though, that is hardest for me to describe for I know nothing else like it. The eyes were yellow. And it had horns, like that of a goat, yet pointed back and curled up. It had two of these horns on either side of its head above its ears. The maw was filled with fangs, as if it could hardly close its mouth. The largest perhaps the size of my thumb." Abren held up his thumb of emphasis. Seeing the growing concern on the faces of the elders, he quickly added, "Yet I struck it with my axe and wounded it badly. If I were given leave of the council, I would go into the forest and finish the task."

"Loyal Abren," Master Alvaius started gently. "You are a boon to us all with your courage and verily a blessing to your brother. Yet, I think it would be a grave disservice to Madoc to allow his only full-bodied son to venture into such unknown dangers alone."

"I will go." Hobsen interrupted. The description that he had just heard had filled him with alarm. There were others that were in far more danger than Medelune from the roaming of such a beast, others that were within the Whispering Wood.

"It seems unfair that those that have already given and risked much are again pressed to service," the reeve said with a note of resignation. "I see two men that offer their hearts and swords on behalf of Medelune and yet neither call these walls home. Gelveled, I would ask for your steel in this matter, as well."

"I am yours to serve, master reeve." It was not fear that had kept him silent. It was duty. Master Alvaius was fully aware of his capabilities and he would go were needed, a soldier through and through. "I would ask this wise council for the addition of a fourth. I know a man with keen wits and a strong arm that would be a fine addition to this company."

"Who is it that you wish to add, fair marshal?"

"A woodcutter named Wynfor. He came to the village yesterday with the others."

"Then I leave it upon your judgment and his." Another puff of the pipe. "Nestor, I wish to purchase provisions for the company, as well as, three barrels of ale to be served at the village meeting tonight. I shall also make preparations for celebration upon the return of our brave men." Nestor nodded. "And Nestor, make sure it is not the same brew that you serve for the meetings of the elders." Alvaius smiled coyly and winked. "Gelveled, I ask that you and your company of fine men leave before the village meeting is convened. 'Tis best that the villagers know that actions have already been taken and I do not wish to delay the expedition due to excess of revelry that a hero's parting may require. Better to make toasts and receive kisses from appreciative maids upon your return."

Hobsen and the others left the home of reeve. He was aware of this man known as Wynfor and also knew that he was not what he seemed. It was time he slipped away for a private discourse with his allies from the Aruilyn to learn more about this beast plaguing Medelune.

Chapter 8: A Confluence of Friends

Hobsen was on one knee under the shade of the silent forest. He was not far from Medelune so that he could return quickly, yet far enough that his rendezvous would go unseen. He had chosen his position with a bit of pragmatism, near a blooming red currant shrub. The woodsman was methodically collecting the small red berries one by one, enjoying their sour sweet taste. The berry clusters were often used in herbal remedies to fight fevers and as an aperient. His father had taught him many lessons of the forest and they were well remembered.

His duties for Medelune had left a rough stubble on his chin. Though his hair was brown, his fresh beard was golden. The company of hunters had been chosen and was waiting to leave before the village meeting convened. Yet Hobsen had important matters to attend to first. Beyond the borders of man existed another world, another realm. As the Wren, he existed between those two worlds - the dominion of man and realm of the wood folk. He was uniquely positioned to see and understand both worlds and yet his dual nature kept him from being fully accepted by either. Hobsen waited by the red currant for the arrival of his oldest friend, Arth.

The bear was slow in coming as he tended to be. The wood folk were less concerned with human conventions of time and promptness than of natural matters, such as food and sleep. Arth was a prime example of this nature. He was a massive creature, nearly the size of two men when stretched to his full height on his hind legs. His summer fur was deeply golden with a tinge of gray on his dark face. As large as he may be, he was adeptly quiet in his woods. And they were, in fact, his woods, at least all within the Aruilyn. Through many generations of man, Arth was the protector of the wood folk. The goblins and wolves of Tarren Nos greatly feared this massive guardian for his ire was fierce.

The golden bear ambled his way through the light forest, stopping to sniff at the hedges and shrubs along his way. His massive paws were padded with velvet fur and crowned with heavy claws. Hobsen smiled as his friend approached and rose to stand. Even on four legs, Arth could meet the Wren eye to eye. The bear lazily came forward and plopped his hind quarters to the ground. He paused for a moment to test the air with his sensitive nose and use a massive paw to attend to an annoying itch on his flank.

"Cael heth, cavail." The bear's greeting rumbled from its chest in a rich bass.

"And peace to you, good friend." Hob spoke the language of man to his ancient friend.

"Too many of those berries and you'll find trouble holding your water in your bowels." Arth, ancient and wise, held a particularly crude sense of humor. His rakish smile, though friendly, revealed wicked canines. Hobsen chuckled and defiantly threw a handful of the red currant into his mouth. "Tobyn has been about Aruilyn to every tree and hole and beyond." This was followed by a long sigh and a rolling of his crystal blue eyes.

Tobyn was a particularly nervous nisse. Small in stature yet great in power, the nisser were a wise and curious people. With his ability to shift between physical forms as quickly as changing clothes, Tobyn knew most everything. He was the eavesdropping warbler, the sneaky feline, the innocuous mouse that found its way into some many homes and steads. For all of his wisdom, Tobyn was also a worrier of the highest order and raced to and fro spreading his fears and concerns to all that would listen. And all of that hustle and bustle led to lost sleep for Arth.

"Yea, a man has been killed, cavail." Hobsen took a somber tone. "And neither by man nor goblin was this life taken. It was something from the woods, these woods. And if it strike in the land of my people, then it will surely strike within Aruilyn."

The bear nodded, its ears turned down in contemplation. It scratched the ground with its claw as it spoke. "I think it a beast from further north, from the mountains cold. There be fouler creatures than Tarren Nos in those rugged peaks. For whatever motive, Hopcyn, it finds itself unwelcome here to prey upon men of Medelune."

"What type of creature do we face?"

"Tobyn has spied upon it." Arth answered. "An abomination of wizard make. Long let loose in the wild to find natural cunning, yet driven by wicked bloodlust." The words hung in the air, the approaching danger palpable.

"I go with a company of hunters, cavail." Hobsen turned to face Medelune upon the bluff. "Perhaps into Aruilyn if that is where the tracks should guide us. This company is formed of their guardian, Gelveled." Hobsen pulled a stolen glove from his belt belonging to the village marshall. The bear leaned forward and captured the scent. "A woodcutter known as Abren, his kin blooded by the beast." He retrieved a leather cover for an awl for the bear to smell. "The last is Wynfor, rarely seen in the village." He offered nothing this time and the bear paused for a moment, studying Hobsen with his crystal blue eyes. "You are guardian of Aruilyn, friend of my father and his father before. And you are friend to me. I ask for your gift of passage for this company of men into these sacred woods should our quarry take us here."

"It is granted, cavail." The bear rose from his seated posture and turned to amble back into the wood. "And see that you return to us in good care." The bear pulled a branch of red currant berries with one paw and disappeared into the forest as silently as his arrival.

Chapter 9: The Truth Of Legends

The company of hunters had quietly left Medelune with sufficient supplies in the dying afternoon. They were headed to Abren's home, a simple cottage surrounded by a low rock wall. His father, Madoc, was fast asleep in a stuffed chair by the side of his wounded son at Cawley's farm. The woodcutter's cottage was empty and ideal to rest a group of men preparing for a journey. This journey was unlike any other, they were headed into forbidden forest to face death. Accordingly, they walked in silence, each with their thoughts.

Abren led the way, holding the bridle of a pack mule loaded with provisions personally provided by the reeve. Gelveled walked shoulder to shoulder with Hobsen. The marshall was well instructed by Alvaius to defer to the expertise of the Wren in tracking the beast. The woodsman was somber, brooding on his secret knowledge of the creature they sought. His senses were relaxed now as they traveled through the growing twilight. A friend with finer senses was hopping from tree to tree in the changing form of a robin or squirrel. Picking up the end of their procession was the silent Wynfor.

He lived far from the village in the sparse woodlands near the Whispering Wood and was rarely seen. The man was thickly muscled with wild hair and a heavy beard. His eyes were disarming, though, friendly and child-like. He walked with a broad axe over his shoulder and his eyes warily glancing to the darkening sky.

The trees cleared and the cottage appeared. It was simple, small, but well kept. The rock wall was chest high and built with crude mortar. Locked in a small shed were the tools of the profession, which included several axes, awls, adzes, and more. The yard was soft dirt with loose seed cast about for chickens to fatten. The only door was guarded by a thick black lock, purchased from Erwan with a set of iron keys. The cottage was quiet and undisturbed. Abren opened the lock and set about lighting a fire. The others began unloading the pack mule, which was then stabled in a small stall leaning against the cottage.

After a few hours work, the fire was warm and the food was ready. Abren ladled leek soup with boiled chicken parts into wooden bowls and set them out onto the thick oak table. Gelveled produced a bulging skin from his pack, poured four servings of spiced ale, and handed them out with a small grin. They slurped down their food in large gulps without pause or conversation. Their bellies full and their spirits warming, they turned to stare into the low burning fire with faraway eyes.

"Abren," Gelveled spoke first. His brother, Lameid, had left last year with a sword and hopes. He felt the wounds struck onto Emen acutely. "Cawley says Emen will see no more days as a woodcutter." The wounds were serious indeed.

"Aye, Gel." Abren replied in a subdued manner.

"With my brother off on a fool's dream to who knows what layer of hell, I could put to use another man of arms in the village." A woodcutter Emen would never be again, but an archer perhaps. "Besides it would keep him close to the lasses to aid in his recovery." A general chuckle followed through the room.

"My many thanks, marshall." Abren spoke the next as if speaking only to himself. "My Da truly loves Emen with a full heart."

Their conversation ranged across mundane topics, mainly guided by Gelveled. Abren spoke at times, Hobsen less so. Wynfor remained silent, but attentive. The skin had been emptied into the four hunters and their hearts were warm and their heads light. It was the marshall who spoke again.

"If only Lord Abelaine were hear to show us the true valor of a knight. Riding upon his massive steed in armor of silver and gold and a lance that would top the very trees. Legends say that he smote forty bandits with a single pass. Ah, an honor it would be to fight at the side of such a hero, crushing foul enemy beneath your boot. A knight so loyal and true, even the glimpse of his approaching banner would drive the enemy routed into the night. Son of Hob, pray tell us what lies within the borders of the Whispering Wood? What manner of creature are we to conquer?"

Hobsen shifted in his chair, yet never removed his eyes from the fire. The room grew silent, only the crackle of the burning log was audible. He had found the room tight with the burden of their expectations. Did they think he would fell the beast with one well placed arrow? Did they think that this was an afternoon's diversion to return

back to Medelune with ribbons tied in their hair for a week of feasting? The villagers had heard many stories around the hearth, spoken by hungry minstrels. In these tales the day was won by the warrior with the truest heart and who professed the noblest convictions. Words upon words.

The woodsman had seen the hard reality of the world. In truth, sometimes good men died and evil prospered. He did not possess a silver tongue for it carried no weight in his land. Instead it was strength of heart that ruled destiny. In these tales, told in warm inns with loved ones close at hand, never do they hear of despair, pain, or failure. Hobsen had suffered wounds that would have killed any lesser man. A chance encounter with a goblin hunting party a few seasons ago. Yet still he lived, not because his notions of nobility or his prayers for help. It was his will to live alone that pulled his near lifeless body inch by inch through the course earth and freezing rain, arrows piercing his body, until he found the herbs he needed to live. Those scars from so many cycles ago were fresh in his mind.

"What would you have me say, Marshall of Medelune?" He raised his gaze to meet Gelveled fully. "I do not have the fineness of speech such as your elders or your reeve. I am forest born and a falsehood has never been spoken by these lips. Do you wish me to say that the morrow will present us with an easy victory won? I wish I could promise that in good faith. Yet I know at my depths that there is likely another outcome. What we face, what beast lurks beyond that locked door, is born and bred for murder. We are only men, held by our notions of law and order and nobility. Do you think that these virtues matter once you step forth into the forest den? Do you think that this beast will offer quarter or mercy? Or that the fine songs written in your legacy will slow the feeding of that beast upon your innards? Those in the great legends that are martyrs, that have lain their lives for king and country, are dead yet still. And it is by creatures such as the one we hunt at first light that would take those lives greedily. Once you enter the ancient wood, I assure you, a beast you must become lest you become the prey yourself." He stood and cast the rest of his drink onto the fire and walked out the door.

Gelveled looked only to the floor, overcome with embarrassment. The words spoken by the woodsman had hit their mark. He sat there long after the others retired to rest, feeling much like a boy holding a wooden sword pretending to be a warrior.

Chapter 10: Whispers And The Wood

The four hunters stood before the ominous forest in a moment's reflection before entering. Hobsen with his bow of yew stood next to Gelveled, armed with a short spear and sword. Abren was carried with his small bow and a woodcutter's axe. Standing behind the row of three was silent Wynfor, his axe dangling easily by his side. Hobsen was confident that no harm would befall his companions from the wood folk. Permission had been granted from Arth and his word was law within Aruilyn. Yet the creature they were hunting was another matter entirely. They were at the site of the attack on Abren's brother, Emen. The woodsman had found tracks and a blood trail that led them into the Whispering Wood.

They crossed the threshold into the forbidden land and the hush of the forest imposed itself on the demeanor of the human trespassers immediately. It was a natural instinct to walk with soft steps and speak only with gestures in this ancient place. Abren was curious to see the trees within this magnificent wood. For so long he had worked

just outside the forest, only guessing at what mighty wood prospered within. Of the three, Gelveled was the least familiar with the wilds and his steps were often clumsy and misplaced. Abren patted him on the back reassuringly after the third harsh glance back from Hobsen at the noise. He had become a different person after Hobsen's rebuke, silent and brooding.

The woodcutter felt deeply for the marshall, so many hopes were resting on his shoulders from the village of Medelune. For so many cycles, Gelveled was the face of soldiery and Medelune's defense. A failure by this company would crush the proud man. He was a warrior without a war to prove himself and now his hair was graying and his muscles aging. It was perhaps his only opportunity to win the honor that had been given from all of those hopeful faces in the village.

The company progressed slowly. The woodsman paused frequently to check the trail and listen for ominous sounds. They were wary of ambush, yet still they continued. The trees grew in size and girth. They passed one that would have taken Emen and Abren a week to fell and trim, reaching beyond the canopy of the forest. The land was bumpy with gulches and gullies crisscrossing their course. The beast was apparently able to avoid most of these obstacles with massive leaps, according to the tracks Hobsen explained along the way. By noon they had ventured far into the forest and still saw nothing.

They took a small break to drink from their skins and tear pieces of bread from their hard loaves. Hobsen was insistent back at Medelune that they would bring no meat into the forest. Instead, he emptied his shoulder pouch of small fruits he had picked along their walk and passed them out to the rest of company. Abren was not impressed with this wild fruit for which he had no name. It was green, as if unripe, and sour. At the center of it was a thick core, like a piece of old bark. The woodsman for his part finished his in a few bites and tossed the fruit core into a deep gulch that gurgled with a stream below. The rays of the sun came down in bright shafts of light, catching the slow hover of dust.

The next few moments unfolded in surreal time. Abren was leaning on a gnarled branch picking at his unknown fruit when the hedge near Gelveled exploded in a roar. The creature stormed into their midst and sent Hobsen reeling with a single swipe of its claw. He crashed into the thicket, his bowstring snapped. Abren dropped his apple and reached for his axe while the creature turned to face Gelveled. His mind was numb. Without the rage of his fallen brother, Abren felt like he was trapped wading through mud. The massive creature lurched onto its rear legs to face the large marshall, easily snapping his spear in two. At last, Abren's mind cleared and he threw his small axe in a single armed throw. Sensing his new adversary, the creature turned and parried away the throw with another vicious roar. It leaped with its massive talons outstretched at the woodcutter.

It struck with paralyzing force. The weight of the creature crashing down on top of him drove the breath from his lungs. His shoulders, caught in the rending grasp of the demon, turned white hot with a fever running down his spine. His scream squeaked from his throat in a ragged gasp. The hands of the creature tightened on his torn flesh like vices, crushing him with unbelievable strength. His mouth filled with blood and bile. Abren looked past the beast for aid. Hobsen was still down. Gelveled seemed to be fleeing into the wood and Wynfor was no where to be seen. He closed his eyes to avoid the burning yellow pits gazing down on him. For a moment he could hear his mother singing as she did when she baked for him as a boy. She was calling to him and he was eager to leave this pain.

Gelveled had turned to dive into the hedge and finally he found for what he was searching. He reemerged with the mighty axe abandoned by Wynfor. With fear knotting his stomach and his hands slick with sweat, the marshall turned to face the creature tearing into young Abren.

"For Alluine!" It was the war cry of his kingdom, much heralded in the stories told around the hearth in the Four Corners. For some reason, calling upon those legends gave him resolve. With full swing, he bore the axe down onto the beast. Gelveled was a powerful man and his swing was skillful. His aim torn into the hindquarters of the creature, crushing the pelvis bone with a wet crack. The beast roared in agony that quickly turned into furious rage. In a flash, it had turned upon Gelveled and pulled the axe from his wet grip. They crashed to the ground in a tumble. The beast was far stronger and ended on top, locked in a bloody wrestling match. Gelveled was feeding on his fear and the adrenaline pumping through his body. All of those matches at the Hamperdown Faire, were keeping him alive as he parried and twisted the attacks of the creature away from his throat and face. The toll on his arms was terrible. Finally those wicked teeth were closing on his face, so he did the only thing we could think that came to mind. He slammed his leathered fist into the maw of the creature as far as it would go. The bite pressure was immediate and painful. The teeth punctured the leather, but went no further. In response the creature whipped its head back and forth, tearing deeper into the flesh of his arm.

Inexplicably, the creature stopped and let go of his arms and body. Gelveled was left completely confused. The creature rose, looking past him. Rolling to see, Gelveled saw Hobsen kneeling matching the gaze of his opponent steadily making a strange circular gesture with his left hand. The marshall's roll painfully alerted him of the ribs broken in his wrestling. The creature, though, was truly mesmerized, held by woodsman's grey eyes from beneath the shadow of his deep hood. Slowly Hobsen retreated into the hedge and the creature matched him step for step as if being led. When Gelveled was clear, he began to stretch for the axe lying near his feet. Hobsen was speaking, but the language was unknown to the marshall.

"Fell beast, you have entered sacred lands. You are mighty and you are strong. You wet your tongue on the blood of man, but do not realize the consequence you pay for trespass within Aruilyn." Hobsen had moved twenty paces away from the bloody fray, the creature following hypnotized. "The guardian of these woods has come."

The trance was broken and Hobsen pulled back his green cloak to uncover his slender sword. The gesture was unneeded as the beast turned to face a growl from the forest that shook the leaves. Gelveled followed its eyes into the brush and gasped at what he saw. Standing there was a massive golden bear with clear blue eyes. The bear's stance was wide and his front haunches low and menacing. The lips curled back to show canines larger than daggers.

The two beasts circled slowly, trading roars before they clashed. Gelveled could feel the waves of force as he lay on his side, holding his ribs. Already wounded and obviously outmatched, the beast used as much savagery as it could with claws, teeth, and horns. The great bear fended off the attacks, patiently waiting for its moment. And the moment came. With a misstep, the beast overcommitted and the bear sent it sprawling with a strike from its heavy paw. The beast, bleeding from its wounded hindquarters, struggled to regain its footing, but it never had a chance. Pouncing with both claws with incredible force generated by the muscular hump on its back, the gigantic bear tore through the creature, killing it instantly.

Having seen more than his eyes could bear, Gelveled returned to his back in a gasp. The canopy of the forest, a mix of shade and sunshine, filled his vision as his faded from consciousness.

Chapter 11: Honor Restored

The marshall awoke with his head resting on a pack and his shirt removed. As his eyes focused, he saw Wynfor kneeling over him preparing to wrap his torso with rough bandages. Hobsen was working on Abren, draining a milky fluid from a collection of vines he had stacked haphazardly by his side. The juice was applied directly into the wounds. Abren was breathing despite his horrific wounds.

"Wynfor ...?" Gelveled had trouble making his words. "Where did you ...?"

"He was frightened when the creature struck and ran into the woods." Hobsen turned and said flatly. "It will be his shame to bear, Marshall of Medelune. No more words need be wasted on what happened here today. Abren will live. He owes you for that."

Gelveled, still confused, looked up into the clear blue eyes of Wynfor above him. Victory had been achieved and the marshall breathe a sigh of relief. The creature had come and was more terrible than any of them had imagined, yet he had held strong. He had done his duty. He gripped Wynfor's hand.

"Worry not," he said to his companion. "The day is ours and all shall be well. The four of us will carry the head of this beast into Medelune as heroes." Wynfor's eyes twinkled for a moment with secret understanding before he nodded obligingly.

Patched and aching, the company made their way out of the forest and back to the road. Wynfor carried Abren on a drag sled, while Hobsen and Gelveled limped along side. The marshall was amazed at how a few moments of action had left his whole body sore and drained. His forearm was heavily bruised with jagged teeth marks, his shoulders scored with deep scratches, and it pained him to breathe too deeply. Still he was happy for in his sack was the head of the creature. By nightfall they arrived at Medelune with the sound of the gatekeeper's horn.

The gates opened and the villagers crowded to see the messy lot enter. There was silence. Gelveled walked forward solemnly and held high the bag holding the trophy. The people of Medelune cheered and the news quickly traveled to all parts of the village. Nestor set to work immediately spitting a carved hog and tapping a barrel of spiced ale. After a few words in private with the company of hunters and the elders, Alvaius appeared with his mandolin to lead the feasting from the veranda of the Four Corners.

The marshall gingerly climbed onto a table with the aid of Nestor's son. With the bag in one hand and a tankard of ale in the other, he began his retelling of their quest.

"Fair folk of Medelune, hear me now! Pray harken to me!" The crowd quieted in anticipation. "The blight that afflicted our land is no more!" Roars of applause and cheering filled the summer night. "Three fine men did I accompany into the Whispering Wood and three finer men you would not find in all the Five Villages. Son of Hob,

the master woodsman, Abren the Mule, son of Madoc, and Wynfor the Strong." He drank to his comrades and the rest followed his example.

"Through their worthy hearts and spilled blood," he removed the head of the beast from the sack to show to the crowd, "this foul beast was slain and sent back to the gates of hell, never to harm another of our fine folk!" There was an audible gasp at the fearsome visage of the beast which turned to cheers. "For Medelune! For the Baron! And for Alluine!"

The night erupted into revelry and feasting. Abren had awoken and was propped at a table with his similarly wounded brother, surrounded by attentive lasses. Nearby Madoc was telling all of the farmers of his brave son, beaming with pride at each word. Gelveled told the story in greater detail to a smaller circle, including many of the elders. He spoke of the attack on Abren and his vicious wounding. He spoke of Hobsen's enchantment on the beast that saved his life. And he spoke of the killing blow struck by Wynfor the Strong with his mighty axe. When pressed for his own exploits, the marshall only smiled as a seasoned warrior might and said it was an honor to serve with such fine men. Women danced and toasts were made well into the night. Yet lost and forgotten in the revelry where two quiet figures that easily slipped out of Medelune and into the forest. Hobsen with his bow already restrung walked along side Wynfor, silent as ever.

"The deed is done. What now for you?" Hobsen asked his companion.

"Ah, perhaps some well deserved rest ... that is if I can keep annoyances from my cave long enough to slumber." Wynfor chortled. "And what of you? Where does your path lead you now?"

"My path?" The Wren paused for a moment. "To the north again. I must know why that beast left the mountains. And, of course, Tarren Nos grows strong yet again." Hobsen turned to face Medelune with is glowing lights and distant music carrying over the lake surrounded by heather.

"It pleases you, cavail, to see your people rejoicing." Wynfor spoke softly.

"Yes, old friend, it does indeed." Hobsen let out a long sigh and looked to the night sky.

Epilogue: The Stirrings of War

The river, known locally as the Akin Dar, made its way through gorges and gullies as it meandered its way lazily down from the mountains and into the ancient forest. Narrow and swift, the river cut deeply into the land and eventually disappeared into the earth at the base of a large hill of limestone. At the midst of the river's descent and on either side where three jagged rocks, very much resembling ancient teeth rising from beneath the earth. These three rocks had been meticulously painted in symbols and adorned with skulls, dangling on chains.

The karst, carved from the flowing water, descended into the earth from the hilly cliff face at a forty five degree angle. On the left hand side was a broad ledge worn with much travel and dotted with secret alcoves. Deeper into the earth, the caves honeycombed in all directions in a combination of natural formations and crafted construction.

The great hill dominating the caves below was overgrown with thorns and thickets, but concealed numerous exits and firing holes. Crowning the apex of the hill was a tattered circle of blue banners. These were the caves of Dash Dammag, known by the wood folk as Tarren Nos.

Just outside the cave, Azghan listened intently to the sounds of the night with his companion. His eyes were wide and yellow. The irises were narrow and formed into slits that granted superb vision in low light. The pale moon was sufficient to allow him to survey the land around him. Azghan was a warrior and wore the adornments of that privilege. These included his curved sword, spear, and small bow. The steel of these items was crudely forged and needed replacing often. On his sword arm, the warrior wore a vambrace in his tribal color, blue. His round leather shield was fastened to his saddle. His hair was tied in three long braids, black and unwashed. In the goblin culture, only the dead were cleaned as preparation for burial. It was considered extremely unlucky to bath.

Laying on all fours, Azghan the Rider's companion napped peacefully. The wolf was easily five times the weight of his goblin rider and twice as large as the wolves roaming the Whispering Wood. The beast was covered in thick grey fur streaked with black. As a wolf rider, or atli, Azghan was at the pinnacle of his society, an elite warrior. His companion was highly intelligent and his closest friend. Many of the atli and their canavors developed secret languages. Their relationship was sacred, a gift from their gods. As a young warrior, groomed and prepared his entire life to become an atli, Azghan had faced the wolf in his trial. If he had failed, he would have been devoured. Instead, his heart was worthy and the massive wolf extended the life bond. Since that time they had never been apart, they were one.

Over the past weeks, Azghan had ranged further and further south with the war party, clearing the neighboring forest. His chief, the strongest warrior of the kanddan, had determined it was time to show the human men that the Urun Gol tribe was still to be feared. For twenty cycles, the Urun Gol had lived in peace and prosperity after the great war, knowing that their raids and battles had earned the respect of their enemies. Yet, the goblin were wise and knew that humans had short memories. It was indeed time to remind them that the Urun Gol were strong and that humans should stay on human lands before their last lesson was forgotten. Even now the shadow scouts were spying upon the villages and homesteads looking for weaknesses.

Azghan looked to the stars far above his home and felt the excitement build in his chest. He was a superb warrior and his canavor a terror on the raid. The atli longed for the glory he had trained for his entire life, the challenge of battle. Perhaps someday he would even add a trophy to the Yas Dirak, the symbol of strength and honor of the tribe. Perhaps he would capture the fine steel of human make and buy a shaman bride. The future held so much potential. His companion snorted with a sleepy look at his rider and the atli returned from the clouds. Azghan had waited season after season for the right omens to appear. He could wait a few months until the weather cooled and the nights grew long again.

The time was soon coming for the humans to tremble with the approach of the Urun Gol banner.