

BOOK 1

Hegel-thorn Legend of The Grim

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Cover art by Masoumeh Tavakoli

ISBN: 9798338157510

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CHAPTER 1

Trotting into a nameless village on the eastern borders of Aclantia. A cloaked rider rode on the back of his mighty steed called Deliverance. It was a stubborn and wild beast and its rider too was known as untameable. Leaping down from Deliverance the rider made his way to the local inn. Rumour had it that a menacing Ala was raining destruction upon the local farm lands and this particular rider wanted to know more before setting off to destroy it. As a ranger, Hegel-thorn was entrusted to protect these lands from evil and so like most curious folk, he became intrigued when word of this Ala reached his ears.

Wiping his boots before entering the inn he walked up three rickety steps to the door, but they already knew of his arrival. "He's here!" A voice yelled as he swung the door open. His leather boots were the only noise that could be heard as a collective of farmers gathered to watch him enter. "Hegel-thorn!" one farmer called out to him, "Our crops have been destroyed by this damn thing!" He slowly moved towards them, his dagger digging into his hip, he readjusted it calmly. He looked rough, his beard overgrown and long unwashed

hair was untamed, he was a man of the road. A man of the wild. His dirt stained hands pointed towards the innkeeper. "An ale!" he called out and plopped himself into a vacant chair.

"Now gentlemen, I know you have concerns with this Ala and I am willing to see what I can do but I must know, who provoked it?"

"It's that damn wizard Waldorf!" one called out.

"That worthless scamp, he hides in the woods in shame of his failures!" added another.

"Now, now gentlemen. I am sure the wizard has no trouble with the people of the north." Hegel-thorn reassured them.

"Go find the wizard!" another shouted as the farmers seemed to be growing restless.

"All our crops have been damaged! What will we do when we cannot pay our taxes? It will be off with our heads!" The concerned voices filled the room and the old bearded man behind the bar passed Hegel-thorn his ale. Wasting no time, he chugged it back and stood, slamming the empty mug back onto the table as he wiped his beard.

"Show it to me!" he said, now annoyed.

At last a large young man stood, "I will show 'em to ya. But I won't be getting too close!" he proclaimed.

Hegel-thorn followed the young lad from the inn, gathered his horse and headed towards the dark and

stormy cloud that rested over a distant field. “Ere it dis,” He pointed to the sky as Hegel-thorn dismounted from Deliverance. “Stay here and watch him,” he said to the horse. Moving confidently towards the dark cloud he stepped through the damaged crops, feeling now the temperature drop as he became closer. A face of clouds now appeared above him and the creature sent pellets of hail towards him. Covering his eyes it struck him, his bones became chilled as the winds swirled around him, nearly knocking him off his feet. A thunderous laugh came from the sky.

“What ails you?” called Hegel-thorn.

“Leave!! Or I shall ensure that these folks never eat from these lands again!” threatened the Ala.

Hegel-thorn looked calmly towards the elemental. “Surely there is something you desire? Name your price.” The Ala then formed into a transparent humanoid. “You shouldn’t concern yourself with the divine realm of magicka! Be gone or I shall ruin these lands in spite of you!” Hegel-thorn shook his head and spat on the earth as the elemental hailed upon him. He now returned fruitlessly towards the horses and the farmer.

“I told ye, it's a horrible bitch of an Ala!” he called out.

Hegel-thorn nodded, “Let us return to the inn. I need another.”

The farmers' coalition eagerly awaited their

return. "Did ye put an end to it?" one asked when they re-entered. "No," answered Hegel-thorn who looked around the room suspiciously.

"No? Well what good are ya?" said the oldest of the lot.

"Too much blood spilled here. The gods are against us!" another gentleman piped up.

"I will get to the bottom of this," said Hegel-thorn, "But who is this wizard you speak of? I shall seek him for counsel," asked Hegel-thorn, unamused.

"Aye, he lives somewhere in the deep, my lord! Its trees begin just 5 leagues north of here. It is said only those who do not seek the wizard can find him amongst the reeds," a beggar sitting alone in the corner of the inn said cryptically.

Hegel-thorn nodded his head towards the vagabond.

"Another ale bar man! And another for my friend there, what's your name?" he asked the beggar. "You may call me Elbus, master Hegel-thorn," said the withdrawing vagabond. He raised his ale to the beggar and watched as nightfall approached, but he was in no haste to face the Deep of Armetius. A place that so few dared to venture.

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The tall trees of the deep had an uninviting darkness at the forest's edge. Enough to bring fear to the most seasoned bushman. "We shall camp here tonight,"

Hegel-thorn spoke to Deliverance. The horse appeared restless beside the large timbers and watched willfully from the light of the fire. The cackling flames and the faint hoots of an owl could be heard in the distance. Hegel-thorn brushed his hand on the nose of the beast, posing a calm feeling over him. *All is well my friend.* Hegel-thorn was gifted with animals, but still struggled with the reluctant Deliverance. Though some creatures were more inclined to his magic than others, Deliverance would often choose to ignore the pointless human banter that so often filled the silence. Horses were creatures that valued action, and so the words of Hegel-thorn were only as meaningful as his deeds that followed.

Poking at the fire, the faint sounds of laughs interrupted his thoughts from the darkness. His eyes now scanned the trees as he spotted some small winged mischievous creatures. Hegel-thorn realised then that these creatures were, of course, pixies. Each danced around the other as their bright auras found their way closer and closer to the fire. Pixies, known for their cunningness, did not fool Hegel-thorn. He stood on guard at the fire watching as a brave Pixie dared to fly close to him. Playfully, it stuck out its tongue and pulled down its pants revealing its butt cheeks. Hegel-thorn laughed as it flew off satisfied. Re-focusing his attention he then realised in this moment his salted jerky was missing. “You little snots!” Hegel-thorn called out

as Deliverance's big eye opened before he fell back asleep.

Now feeling foolish, he decided to take things into his own hands. Sprinting towards the woods he followed their distant auras in hopes to come across their settlement. Not because he needed the jerky, but simply for the fact that he was a ranger and he wasn't going to let a pixie steal his food without consequence. It was up to him to set the precedent. As he was the judge, jury, and executioner of this land and someone needed to hold these pixies accountable.

Soon enough he found them. A small shanty settlement, filled with over 20 shacks covered in magical deterrents. The pixies didn't know it but Hegel-thorn's magic allowed him to see things that were rather elusive to the average human eye. These wards the pixies had around their home would not fool him. He watched them feed their kin as they gathered to feast on their newest loot. In a moment's notice he cast a subtle spell. "En Frigoreh," he whispered and the pixies froze. Hegel-thorn now entered their settlement and could hear their small hearts beat faster and faster as he approached their stiffened bodies.

Stepping over them carefully he grabbed the jerky. "Now that I have your attention, I will be taking back what is rightfully mine," he said as he put a piece in his mouth and laughed. Their wee little eyes trembled as he sat amongst them with a twisted smile waiting for

his spell to expire. Suddenly they scattered violently out of their camp as it wore off. "I just wanted to talk!" he yelled out as they vacated the area. Laughing, he then stood and wandered back towards Deliverance with an amused grin.

Deliverance stood on his four legs as Hegel-thorn revealed himself from the shadows of the trees. He snorted and stomped until he recognized the smell of his friend. "Damn pixies! I tell yea, they have no boundaries these creatures!" Hegel-thorn spoke aloud for Deliverance to hear but he seemed to not care about such matters. Tossing another log on the fire he continued to stare into the flickering flames as he hummed himself into a meditative state. His mind seemed to be at ease as he became intune with the world around him. He could feel the overwhelming energy of the life forces in the forest. Each insect, animal, and plant had its own vibration and he felt in harmony with the ever turning pulse of existence.

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As the sun shone through the trees indicating it was time to move on, Hegel-thorn wasted no time to pack and embark down the narrow paths of the road ahead. Deliverance was not a fan of such mysterious wooden realms. As he, like Hegel-thorn, was well aware of the monstrosities that lived outside of civil society. There were many enigmatic folk that lived in the deep and this wizard would be no exception. The

type of magic user who chooses to live in solitude is a curious creature and so the ranger of Aclantia would wander with caution trying to not find the very thing that he was certainly looking for.

The trot of Deliverance hooves drummed along the overgrown path as Hegel-thorn pressed out his sensory perceptions. He listened intently beyond the sound of the rhythmic horse shoes crushing the ground. “We ought to hop off the beaten path and have a look around,” he said, “Perhaps by getting lost we will find what we're looking for?” he whispered into Deliverance's ear. The horse nodded and came to a halt as he dismounted and landed softly on the moss.

The woods were silent. As if the Gods held their breath and the world stopped spinning. Hegel-thorn's neck hairs were on end as he felt a strange sense of terror wipe over him. Deliverance shook his head and stomped his feet with a snort. Grabbing his small bow he readied an arrow. Taking a deep breath he closed his eyes and listened to the world around him. Beside him he could sense Deliverance's anxiety, but beyond the horse was something else, a deep rhythmic heartbeat just 50 yards away. He could not see the monster but knew it was there. He touched Deliverance to calm him. *Get behind me friend. A predator awaits.*

Slowly, Deliverance moved behind him as the ranger watched with his grey eyes into the darkness. A glimpse of a large lizard-like creature moved into his

sight. It had sharp teeth but yet something plant-like stuck in his mind. It camouflaged into the woods and hid itself, eluding his vision. Deliverance became spooked as he sensed it drawing nearer. The bow was now cocked, and he focused his magic to determine where to shoot. Suddenly from the side of him he caught a glimpse of movement and readjusted his body releasing an arrow. Striking the creature in its chest. A horrifying scream abrupted as it charged ahead with its talon-like claws towards them.

With a quick step Hegel-thorn ran towards it, dropping his bow and releasing his dagger from his hip. Without hesitation he slid onto his back skimming under the belly of the beast puncturing through its guts violently. The creature screeched as its intestines spilled onto the ground and the lifeless body of the lizard drooped over him. With some effort, Hegel-thorn wrestled himself from underneath it and emerged covered in a thick green blood.

Deliverance in celebration circled the corpse snorting in triumph as Hegel-thorn watched carefully. Until he noticed something on Deliverance's shoulder, "What is that?" he pointed. The horse looked, a thought of panic came over him. Hegel-thorn spoke aloud only then to feel a small prick in his own neck and reflexively pulled a tiny dart from it. "Sanah Venum," he muttered as he fell to the ground, his vision growing cloudy as he heard a rustling from the bushes behind

them before falling into an unavoidable darkness.

CHAPTER 2

Honixula and Henrik now sat in the buggy making their way towards the Highlands to meet with King Hughes. Joining them was the notorious halfling bard named Moondog. His quick tongue and guitar were known to bring great fortune and Honixula wanted all the luck she could in pursuing her destiny. Halflings historically were known to be lucky creatures and Honixula believed Moondogs presence would only complement her existing intentions.

*Honixula, Honixula the Queen of the tower, for here we
are on this final hour.*

*We head north to the land of the Hughes to give him
news of his errors and muse.*

*For whom is the divinest of all, Honixula the most
beautiful to call.*

Her wisdom and magic are so powerful and true.
He winked as she smiled in satisfaction.

“Now now bard, no need for flattery. Just play me a gentle tune. I wish only to hear the softest of chords for the remainder of our travels. Something eloquent,” she said coldly.

“Of course my lady,” Moondog replied and

began strumming a tender tune as he watched both Honixula and Henrik doze into sleepiness. The bard was not only known for his music but also his charm. He could quite literally provoke emotion or put one to sleep at the will of his tongue. Like a wizard and his staff, his guitar was simply an extension of himself. A rare gift for a halfling and one he knew not to squander.

The buggy rolled on and Moondog continued to play a slow and methodical tune to help drown out the noise of the road, but soon the hissing of swords from their sheaths filled the air. “Highwaymen!” the Commander's voice yelled when suddenly Henrik sprung awake. Instantaneously, he exited the buggy and leapt to the ground. He muttered something and a glowing energy left his hands, leaving a violent blast towards the front of the carriage.

Moondog did not know Henrik to have such talents and was caught by surprise to hear such spells of magic erupt from him, “Morteh Orbis!” he screamed over and over until he exhausted himself. Commander Lightfoot's voice could be heard shouting orders, “They are flanking us!” Henrik called for Honixula, “My Queen, your help!” Honixula, who remained rather serene, answered the call of her advisor by unceremoniously levitating herself to the ground. Raising her hands she muttered a spell, causing the battlefield to fall into a cold silence. Moondog could not move, but watched as she walked to each of the

highwaymen in a dangerously calm manner.

Casually, she removed a dagger from her cloak and one by one slit each of their throats. Suddenly, her spell began to wear as each of them fell to the ground. Blood spilled from their necks as they ruinously thrashed their last breath. She walked purposefully back to the buggy, wiping her blade on the side of her dress and rejoined Moondog. The others, still stared in disbelief as their enemies lay slain. "A song my lady?" Moondog broke the silence. "Yes, something to take the edge off." She glanced at him as he tried to not look afraid. "Of course," he smiled.

Henrik now returned and appeared exhausted. "My Queen, it was not our intention that a militia of so many would be waiting." She looked unimpressed. "I am starting to wonder why so many well armed men would be waiting this very day, on this very moment," she questioned, as Henrik trembled in response. "Never would I betray you." He took her hand and stared into her eyes.

"All here support the prophecy. There are no traitors amongst us. This I promise you."

Honixula pulled her hand away, "I cannot spend anymore of my power. Or I will be unable to fool the king for his love of me."

Henrik nodded as he searched through her leather wrap and grabbed one of the dark potions that she carried. He passed it to her as she popped the cork

and drank the mysterious liquid. "I only have four left," she announced aloud to Henrik who seemed to understand the importance of such things.

Finally, in the far distance the Highland mountain range could be seen. The vast and godly rocks, littered with snowy peaks pierced the sky. The buggy's wheels now seized to spin and Commander Lightfoot knocked on the cabin door.

"My lady, we are to make camp," he said. Nearby a creek flowed slowly and a large lot of cedar trees grew with a great canopy overhead of them. "I will have my men set up your accommodation," he added.

"Very well," she said. The Commanders men scurried off and began putting together a large canvas tent. Henrik began now to get involved. "Commander, please send a man or two to gather wood. I will start the fire." The Commander whose long blonde hair had fallen in front of his face pushed it aside and yelled for his mercenaries. "Drouin, Buritch! Gather wood!" Both hardy men stood straight and spoke in unison, "Yes sir," as they abandoned their other tasks.

Shortly after the Queen's quarters had been set, Drouin and Buritch had returned with wood and Henrik started the fire with the use of magic. This captivated the common men once again. The Commander watched Henrik closely as flames engulfed the wood effortlessly by the word of his mouth. The men murmured in

amazement, for they had not seen so much magic in one day. One being Honixulas incredible feat and Henriks lesser but still impressive abilities. “Shaw and Bjorn, find some meat. Nightfall is coming and I am sure the animals are stirring at the forest's edge,” the Commander said aloud as both soldiers took their bows and left at once. “Commander, you have first watch,” said Henrik, further establishing the power dynamics of the group.

“I have some worries, Commander. Whispers of vile beasts linger in these woods. I have heard tales of wanderers who fall victim to werewolves and wake in the morning covered in the blood of their own kin,” said Henrik with a look of concern.

“Fear not master Henrik, these are only tales. I have travelled these roads many times and Hughes has long put a price on the heads of werewolves. For if we do cross one, I shall bring its human head with me as a prize to the King,” he reassured Henrik.

“I shall trust your judgement,” Henrik nodded, satisfied. Henrik nor Honixula were accustomed to life on the road as they often stayed fortified in the safety of the castle. Though Honxiula would never admit it, she too feared the road and though she was unmistakably powerful, it is the unknown that even the most divine warlocks and sorceresses fear. Honixula then emerged from her canvas enclosure, she had changed her clothes and now mesmerised the Commanders men with her

great beauty. She appeared satisfied in detecting their lust and knew that all and any would happily serve whatever she asked of them. "Someone bring me some food, I am quite famished." She then turned around and went back into her tent. "Of course my lady," Buritch stood and put together a bowl of soup along with a small collection of wild onions and berries.

Buritch nervously announced himself at the door of the tent.

"My Queen it is I, Buritch," he hesitated for a second outside her door.

"You may enter," she answered.

The room was filled with a type of incense that smelled of herbs and inside a grand carpet and cushioned seat created a comforting space. "My goodness, what great beauty in your accommodation my lady!" Buritch looked astonished at the lavish chambers as he placed her meal on a nearby table. "Please join me," she asked him as he nodded in agreement.

"Tell me Buritch, why did Commander Lightfoot choose you to accompany me on this journey to the Highlands?" Buritch hesitated a moment as he sat across from Honixula who sipped her soup. "The Commander chose me because I am a great navigator of the lands. I know many paths and ways around the kingdoms," he said proudly. "I serve you my Queen," Buritch bowed his head at the table. She was very delighted at his response and picked at the wild berries

on her plate as she stared at him in an uncomfortable gaze. "I have foreseen your worth in a vision. You are of vital importance in ensuring the prophecy is fulfilled. Did you know that? That whatever may happen in the coming night, you must live, Buritch of Estangull." A look of surprise crossed his face. "I know all there is to know about you." She touched his hand and in a flash Buritch felt her knowledge flow through him. He nodded in understanding as he left the tent and returned to the evening fire.

CHAPTER 3

Stirring awake, Hegel-thorn found himself in an unfamiliar place. His hands were not bound which surprised him and he lay by a warm hearth with the comfort of a bearskin draped over him. Careful not to alarm his captor he scanned with his eyes, trying not to exhibit his wakefulness. Though he had doubted it would make much of a difference, he leapt up from the floor and wobbled to his feet. He was slow to gain his balance and found himself being stared down by a tall bearded man who sat at a chair watching him rather suspiciously. “So you are the ranger who can perform magic?” the voice sounded old and accusing. “Tell me, where did you learn such things?” Hegel-thorn, still gaining his footing, plopped himself back on top of the bearskin blanket and sat down cross legged. His intuition told him that there was no threat.

“Well.. what say of you? Speak quickly, I am an old man, time is precious you know!” the voice commanded.

“I am Hegel-thorn, my bloodline is unknown, my lord. I am afraid that my origins too are unknown.”

“Of course, of course,” the voice sounded

annoyed, “A powerful warlock or witch, I reckon. Perhaps a mage. Ahh who are we kidding, all of our origins are unknown to some degree! What started it all, it always comes back to that!” he ranted. Hegel-thorn raising both his hands drew them to his head and pushed back his long brown hair to reveal his ears. “A half elf,” the old man said in an alarmed tone, “Very interesting. Very, very interesting.” The room now fell silent and in this moment Hegel-thorn investigated the rickety shack of his capture. In the corners, jars full of creatures and plants filled the walls accompanied by a large collection of dusty old books of the most grand kind.

“Are you Waldorf?” he asked rather sleepily.

“That depends who’s asking?” the bearded man replied.

“I seek counsel on removing an Ala from the farm lands. I serve the people of Aclantia. Perhaps you have heard?”

“I do not meddle with human crises. Surely even you know that this Ala will leave for a price.” The man seemed uninterested.

“I have tried to bargain with the creature, but it will not leave. It does not want money but rather it told me it has more divine concerns. I will repay you fairly for your counsel.” The man sat quietly for a moment considering his words as he stared into the flames of the mantle.

Suddenly now erupting from the inferno an eagle shaped familiar emerged. It flew around the shack elegantly before landing on his hand. Hegel-thorn, quite stunned by the magic, watched the bird whisper something to the man before it disappeared into a puff of smoke. Hegel-thorn waited patiently, trying not to act impressed by the powerful sorcery he had witnessed. "Please, the people of Aclantia depend on these farm lands for food!" Hegel-thorn pleaded. The man now stared upon him and in a frighteningly calm voice he said, "The people of Aclantia will get what they deserve. Their involvement in this hedonism comes at a price! The gods are angry ranger, for the people have defiled their creator. A great evil lurks and those of us with magic must decide which dog we are to feed as the winds of change blow near." the old man warned.

Hegel-thorn, taken back by the his words, did not speak. He instead watched him storm off to a table that was covered in books and parchment. Shortly after he returned with a rustic old book in his hand, "You see here!" He pointed to a page and a picture of a child. "This is the fate that is to unfold. The child of the half moon is to be born less than a year from now. The prophecies have told it. The time is upon us, I can feel it in my bones. The Ala is of little importance in the greater scheme of things. Though I will say Ala's do fear eagles! They cannot stand the call of them."

"Thank you for the tip, but one must ask, do you

not care for the troubles of men? Is it not funny that your world revolves around crystal balls and prophecies while my problems exist here in reality?" Hegel-thorn said boldly.

"Ahh my young lad, is it not within the realm of possibility that our worlds are not separate at all. That we are in fact speaking of the same worlds but with different tongues. You yourself are the very magic you wish to vanquish. I can sense this and I have heard whispers that you're not a ranger at all master Hegel-thorn, in fact the druids have come to me plenty of times wondering if you are a shapeshifter or some kind of warlock who has fallen from the path of destiny. Your very existence is a curiosity and no one seems to know where you came from or who you are. A strange phenomenon for a ranger isn't it?" the man spoke with curiosity.

Hegel-thorn, caught off guard, fell silent evaluating all that was said.

"Do you think you just happened upon me by accident? That you just wandered into the dangerous woods of Armetius and by mere chance you arrived?" the man asked aloud.

"I came searching for your counsel." Hegel-thorn responded, "It does not surprise me to find what I am looking for."

"Did you? Searching for me? But you do not know me. Is it not possible that this very moment was

written long before you even knew you existed? It is written in the stars, this very moment, but tell me, I have a pressing question, why do you choose to live on the road master ranger?"

Hegel-thorn thought for a moment, "It is my duty," he replied. Holding his hand over his heart.

The man laughed. "Is it? Do you tell yourself that when you awake each day? That you are some kind of hero of the people?" he sounded amused as he paced the narrow halls of the shack.

"What's it to you? It is my life and I will not sit here and listen to a foolish old man's paranoia."

The man did not like that and began to become agitated. Raising his voice in a deep and dark tone he said, "I am no fool nor man. I am a descendant of the divine. You are a mere consequence of lust, a half-blood who cannot understand the game you meddle in!" Hegel-thorn laughed in response.

"Oh wizard you have revealed yourself now! You believe to be wise but don't you see the ignorance in the things you do not know. The difference between you and I, is that I do not pretend to know things based on my blood or heritage. You act as if you by the grace of your existence speak for your kin. You are merely a drop of water in an ocean, and I, a blade of grass on a field. Do not speak of truth from your pedestal. I can think for myself and need not a wizard or sorcerer to whisper nonsense to me. I have your answer Waldorf. I

choose the road and Deliverance not because I am running but because I do not seek to rent my mind to fools!”

Waldorf shook his head at Hegel-thorn like one who shakes his head to a man who has drunk too much wine. Now gaining his footing, Hegel-thorn stood as his senses returned to him.

“Where is Deliverance?”

“Out back,” Waldorf said calmly.

“Bring me to him!” he demanded.

Waldorf, with a movement of his hand and a mutter under his breath summoned a black raven onto his shoulder. Turning its head towards him it cawed and swooped towards the door of the shack. “Follow, Erebus. I am too busy to concern myself with your pettiness!” Hegel-thorn unceremoniously followed the bird and was brought to a small stable behind the shack. There was another horse there, it was white and much larger than his own. Hegel-thorn ran his hand over Deliverance, patting him, “About time we leave friend.” Hegel-thorn then made eye contact with the beautiful white beast. “And who is this?” Deliverance spoke into Hegel-thorn's mind, *Erebus*. Hegel-thorn looked confused as he did not see the Raven. Now reaching he put his hand onto the large white beast.

“What is your name?”

“I am Erebus, ally to Waldorf of the deep.”

Hegel-thorn stared into the horse' eye and

watched it turn yellow like the ravens. “What fascinating creature you are.” he spoke aloud and the creature spoke back into his mind, “*I am many things. One day when you are wise and not dead you may know.*” Hegel-thorn looked intrigued but knew his time was limited. “I don't have time for games. Perhaps our paths will cross again Erebus,” Hegel-thorn leapt from the ground and onto the back of Deliverance, “Like lightning we shall run, from the ground to the sky we are one. Your legs are my own, my heart is your heart and may our blood flow like the rivers to the sea!” Deliverance suddenly filled with a surge of urgency and roared out from the stable into a trot. “May the earth guide us from the deep.” Hegel-thorn said aloud, surrounding them with an aurora of magic as they trenched through the thickage searching for the road.

CHAPTER 4

A howling in the distance awoke Commander Lightfoot as he dozed off by the fire, a man of his word he slapped himself awake and refocused for the first watch. Fighting his sleepiness he stood and walked to the edge of the darkness to ensure his eyes could adjust easily to any threats. He heard his men stir in their tents as another long howl came from the distance. With his sword in his sheath he grabbed the handle and listened. As a mere mortal man with no magical aptitude he could not sense beyond the darkness if an enemy awaited. He did not fear werewolves; knowing they were impulsive creatures but he did fear something and the impending darkness always found its way to make fools, even out of the bravest men. Historically, the Highlands were known for such beasts, as Druidic people had a long history in this region. King Hughes himself was from this ancient Druidic bloodline, and on his own will he could transform himself into any beast one could imagine.

“What happenin out ere Lightfoot?” Burtich emerged from his tent. “A were out there?” he whispered. A small rustling came from the bushes and

something charged now towards them. Suddenly a large horse ran into their vision. "I be damned, it's a fine steed!" Lightfoot tried grabbing at it by its reins, trying to keep it from snorting and waking the others, as they both wrestled the beast into submission. Both realising it was covered in blood they investigated its body for wounds. "This aint horse's blood," confirmed Buritch. "Something out there ye think?" asked the Commander who was beginning to grow cautious.

"Probably just wolves."

"But whose horse is this?" The Commander looked out into the darkness.

A stomping of hooves could be heard and in this instance the Commander shouted an alarm, "Wake up!" he called.

The camp erupted and soon all but Moondog and Honixula emerged into the moonlight. Henrik instantaneously caused a circular ring of flames to surround them. "You fools!" Henrik screamed. Henrik, who was able to see in the night, illuminated a small group of centaurs at the edge of the darkness. A large centaur stepped half into the flames and with a booming voice spoke, "Who dares enter Fangelthroft!" The deepness of the centaurs' voice stunned Drouin and Shaw who seemed to tremble into sleepiness. Behind the centaur four others played flutes in a melancholic rhythm, causing the camp to fall into a dream-like state. Honixula, who awoke in all the commotion stepped

from her tent, but to the sound of the flutes fell suddenly to the ground.

The flames around the camp finally ceased as Henrik too fell fast asleep but one character was immune to the melancholic music of the centaurs, Moondog, who had drank a bottle of wine at dinner had soon found himself awake to the ruckus of the camp. Kicking the buggy door open he emerged and caught the centaurs off guard. “My dear friends, what in the gods' names are you doing?” The halfling was a curious creature and long had centaurs kept positive relationships with the small folk of the western grasslands, but these centaurs were quick to draw their bows on the bard. Jumping from the buggy, Moondog kept himself cool and collected as he made conversation. “I am so happy you have come, this horrible lot have forced me to entertain them for cheap wine and food scraps!” Moondogs face looked full of relief.

“Stand still halfling,” the leader of the centaurs commanded.

“I swear to you, I am Moondog, a bard from the longhills of Chesterfield!” he bowed.

“I have heard of you,” said the leader of the centaurs, “you may call me Baron.”

“Please, allow me to leave or provide refuge, lord Baron of Fanglethroft!”

“Answer our questions and you will not be

harmed,” warned the centaur, “Who are these folk? And what is their business?”

“This is Honixula, a powerful sorceress. I am afraid that you may have brought great pain upon your people if you do not slay her now. I am afraid horrible consequences await,” warned Moondog.

During his brief explanation, Buritch stirred awake and watched him speaking to the centaurs. He carefully went over and shook Henrik to consciousness. Henrik’s eyes opened slowly as Buritch covered his mouth. Realising what had befallen them Henrik in desperation expelled a powerful blast onto the leader of the centaurs. “Serenade them my brothers!” yelled Baron as the attack deflected off of him. Henrik looked suspiciously as his attack appeared ineffective. He soon fell again into unconsciousness as the powerful magic of the centaurs flute soothed him into sleepiness. Baron reapproached Moondog after securing the others.

“Tell me bard, what business do these powerful sorcerers have in Fanglethroft. They must know that while in the sacred gardens we are immune to any who harm us!”

“I am simply an entertainer, my lord. Their business is with King Hughes to mourn the death of Queen Valoria,” he said innocently.

“The death of Queen Valoria? She lives, I assure you.” Baron spoke with curiosity, “Where did you hear of this news?”

The halfling pointed towards Honiuxla as the centaur spoke something in his tongue causing a look of surprise across the faces of his brethren. "You must come with us," he said, "You have become rather entangled in something that is beyond our wisdom," Baron admitted and bowed on one knee in front of Moondog making himself low enough for him to mount. "The time is now for you halfling. We make haste to the Highlands." Moondog, who hadn't the faintest clue on what was going on, did not hesitate to follow the instructions of the centaur, who had now created an urgency in the bard, "May I grab my things?" he asked. Baron nodded, "Yes. But move quickly. There is much at stake!"

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It was near morning when the centaurs and Moondog had reached the border of the Highlands, a small watch tower with archers and soldiers awaited. A faint horn had blown as they approached and a large gate opened as the creaking gears and sounds of men ushered them into the stronghold.

"What is this place?" asked the bard.

"It is the Southern Post. A rough but safe place, you will remain here under the watch of the King's men," Baron explained.

The opening in the stronghold filled with curious faces as the centaurs entered. "It is not often we reveal ourselves to human folk," Baron spoke aloud for

Moondog, "It is our duty to protect Fanglethroft, but this news of Valoria ails me. I leave you here halfling amongst the Highland folk. Your journey is over and you are safe," Moondog did not argue. He had not yet been paid by Honixula for his services and so he had only what coin he carried. Fortunately the locals had become mesmerised by his small stature, not nearly as much as the centaurs but mesmerised nonetheless. "That boy looks like a man!" a young lad said aloud to his mother who pinched him and smiled politely towards Moondog. "It's from smoking that wizards weed!" Moondog looked at the boy, "Too much of it and I never did grow. Never try it my lad!" Moondog spoke so seriously to the boy who now had a worried look on his face. His mother nodded her head in thanks. Moondog, now garnering the attention of the folk, pulled his guitar from his back and began to strum some chords. Baron smiled, "I see that you will be okay," he patted Moondog on the back, "Stay safe Moondog of Longhill. May our paths cross again. I hope under better circumstances!"

Folk gathered around and Moondog now had the sublime opportunity to take the attention off the centaurs who were now talking to the guards. In the corner of his eye he watched as they exited the post and two men on horses joined them. Moondogs fingers moved rapidly across his guitar, causing more folk to focus on him. Shouts from the crowd erupted, "Magic

fingers!” one yelled. This made Moondog laugh as he continued to strum. Some of the peasants began dancing and the crowd was awaiting his lyrics.

*In the rolling hills of the highlands, North of
Fangelthroft, there was something dark and evil,
obscuring all my thoughts. Something so dividing it
didn't even breathe, cutting all the lepers' throats like
there was nothing to see.*

*Oh and I can see the rising sun, one day is over, but
another has just begun and I can feel the anger rise in
my fellow man, a boy, a woman, and a witch or
something I don't quite understand.*

*Obscuring thoughts of confusion, this is what they do.
They break down all the rules just to make you seem
like fools. You forget what you are, even your own
name, this is the way of the insane.*

*I am just a halfling with a twist in my tongue. You are
the fellow people of the Highlands southern emporium.*

Now grab me a whiskey or maybe a rum!

The crowd applauded and Moondog looked back at the guards who watched him carefully. “I must be on my way now, good folks of the Southern Post!” he said with sincerity. “Please thank your King and guards for they have allowed me refuge in this fine establishment tonight!” Moondog glanced again back at the guards who looked amongst themselves. *That should do it.* He thought to himself and grinned and waved at the crowd around him.

“Get him an ale!”

“A room at the inn!”

“For the King!” another added. Moondog was pleased at the applause and gestures, “Thank you, thank you!” he responded.

“It seems I must be going now, there are places and people to attend to!” Moondog waved and made his way through the small crowd and onto the catwalk towards the guards. A big goofy looking man spoke as he made his last steps, “A halflin with a voice like dat!” Three other guards stood there with impressed looks on their faces. “Fancy words my little friend!” said another. “Thank you gentleman, thank you. This is my trade. Hoping to have a pleasant stay this evening!” The three nodded, nearly mesmerised by him. “Hello good lads! Now where can I meet, the one who's in charge? You see, I never planned on staying at an inn. I'm going to need to earn my stay I reckon?” The goofy man seemed to have a sense of urgency in him.

“Oh right away Mr. Moondog, Me wife has heard all about you and I would love to house ye for the night!”

“Thank you good stranger, but I do appreciate my privacy and would need a room in your local inn preferably,” he said earnestly.

“Aye, follow me,” said the tall scrawny guard. “I will take you to the inn. Commander Gordon will join you shortly,” he elbowed at the Goofy guard and glared.

“That is more like it.” said Moondog who followed the scrawny man down the catwalk and into town. “By the way, my name is Bruser. Don't be fooled by these morons who fall for your magic. I am not so easily persuaded,” Bruser shot a glance at Moondog who sensed that he knew all too well what he was up to. “Commander Gordon knows all about magic folk and he won't be too pleased to know you were meddling without a permit.” Suddenly Bruser stopped and opened a door to a small inn called the Stinging Nettle. “One room for the halfling!” Bruser commanded and an old bartender wearing spectacles winced towards Moondog. “Very well.” He said with a grin as he hustled towards them from behind the bar. “Follow me Mr. Moondog, we are pleased to have you, though unexpectedly we have not prepared for a bard of your status. Please forgive our simple chambers,” Moondog, who had not the faintest idea that his reputation had carried as far as the Southern Highlands, was ecstatic. “I am sure your accommodations will be more than adequate,” he bowed lowly. The innkeeper's face had a look of relief as he brought him to his room.

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The night was going to be long as Moondog knew a performance of his most excellent calibre would be required. It was not so often a small ruffian town gets a sensational talent to hear. But knowing all too

well his meals and wine were on the line, and so the stakes were high. They became even higher when Commander Gordon entered the inn mid-performance. Moondog catching a glimpse of the Commander's impatience finished his song and exited the small stage towards him. Gordon was an older man, grey of hair with dark brown eyes. He sat at a booth awaiting the bard.

“Moondog of Longhill,” the Commander paused, “I need to ask you a few questions.” Moondog’s face had a look of concern and thoughtfulness as he sat himself across from him.

“What is it that I may help you with?” he replied.

“A man like me is immune to your charms and so I ask you to be honest with me as I will know if otherwise.” Moondog nodded in agreement. “Tell me about this Honixula? Is this the same one who rules the Southern Colonies?”

“I know little of her my lord, her halls pay good coin for my song and so I found myself employed by her as of most recently.”

“And I hear they have come to slay Queen Valoria?” he looked serious.

“They spoke as if she were already dead. I swear to you I had not the faintest clue that Queen Valoria lived. And truthfully I don't know a thing about her!”

“I believe your words, but I cannot believe that

you did not know that you rode with scoundrels and menaces! Why should I not slit your throat this very second by affiliation?"

Moondog almost laughed at the threat. "I am not one to judge. When I do not have bread in my pockets to eat I must take all the coin I can get Commander! I simply am surviving as I know how to." Gordon looked at Moondog sincerely, "The centaurs were fools to not slay her in her sleep my lord."

"Centaurs do not kill without reason. It is not your place to say or decide such matters. I have arranged for you to be escorted to the King. He wishes to further question you. These manners intrigue him," the Commander remained calm.

"I am to meet the King?" confirmed Moondog.

"The King will know what to do with you," The Commander had a serious stare. "You are fortunate to know your fate. Most are not so lucky," he said coldly as he stood and began to walk towards the innkeeper who was speaking to a hooded man who watched from a distance.

CHAPTER 5

Finally emerging from the maze of the deep, Hegel-thorn and Deliverance found themselves on a beaten path heading towards the Southern Highlands. “Happy to be out of there!” Hegel-thorn said aloud as he rubbed Deliverance's ear. Kicking him ever so slightly they burst down the road as the final slivers of daylight shone on the distant gates of the Southern Post. Years prior, Hegel-thorn had fought aside the post to help capture a violent werewolf that ran rampant killing dozens of innocents. Ever since, his relationship with the folk of the keep had always been welcoming. Shouts from the distant guards called out as they spotted them, “And still he lives. Further evading death master Hegel-thorn, my good friend, how are you?” shouted Bruser, who had recognized him long before he reached the gate.

“I come with word from the deep old friend. I somehow got turned around and ended up here,” he yelled back.

“A ranger who lost his way? Oh a tale to tell.” Commander Gordon chimed in with a smile, appearing

now beside Bruser.

“It is not my intention to show up unexpectedly. Forgive me old friends. Deliverance and I seek a warm meal and a roof over our heads.”

“Open the gates!” yelled Commander Gordon who ran down the catwalk with Bruser to meet with Hegel-thorn.

“For an old friend there is always a place to stay.” Bruser reached out his arm towards him as he dismounted Deliverance and held a soldier's embrace. Commander Gordon imitated Bruser, embracing him joyously. “A fine face to see on these dreary days,” said Gordon who now looked at Deliverance, “And I have some oats and a stall for you too!” Deliverance snorted playfully as two guards guided him to the stables. “What truly brings you here so unexpectedly Hegel-thorn?” Bruser asked curiously.

“I went to seek counsel with the wizard known as Waldorf, but as always with the wizarding folk, he was full of riddles and nonsense. Though I do now have a solution to rid an Ala that I am to vanquish from the outskirts of Aclantia. So not entirely a waste!” he admitted.

“Aye, strange folks that live in the woods alone. I reckon he has had one too many of those ergot roots that grow so abundantly there. I have heard about frightening beasts that reside there, ones that prey on the men foolish enough to enter!” Commander Gordon

said aloud as some more of the guards gathered at the edge of the catwalk. "Well let's get on with it. Follow me, I will take you to the Stinging Nettle. We even have a special guest for entertainment tonight!"

Hegel-thorn looked at the Commander curiously. "Oh a very special guest," Bruser said with a sarcastic tongue.

Hegel-thorn followed closely behind as they headed towards the inn. It was a small and crowded venue and the music was amplifying itself from a small stage. Standing upon it was a charismatic halfling singing passionately. The creature shot a glance at Commander Gordon and unceasingly continued playing. "Go and fetch yourself a meal," Gordon pointed to the kitchen and Hegel-thorn hastily took his suggestion. "Thank you," he said as his mouth began to salivate. Moving confidently towards the counter he made eye contact with the inn master and got his attention. "A hot stew available my lord?" he asked, the innkeeper nodded. "Swen!" shouted the man, "Do we have any stew left for a weary ranger?" he yelled over all the commotion. Hegel-thorn now plopped down in a seat as he listened to the halflings song, tiredly fighting his sleepiness before a hot bowl of soup was placed in front of him. "Commander Gordon says it's on the house." The man pushed his glasses up and carried on with his duties. The warm stew was welcoming as each spoonful replenished him with the comforts of

civilization.

Noticeably, the halfling scurried across the room and was now talking to the Commander. "Who is the bard?" asked Hegel-thorn to a drunken man who sat beside him.

"Disss Moonbug fella, talented boy," he slurred.

"Aye!" he replied.

Raising his glass to the drunkard he doubted the information was entirely accurate but cheers him anyway. "Moondog." The innkeeper corrected, "He is cut off for the night," he smiled.

"A man who has had one too many good times," he went on, "Perhaps owes some time to his wife and family." The innkeeper stared at the drunkard disappointedly as he shined a glass.

"What business does a halfling have here?" Hegel-thorn asked, hoping to hear the latest gossip.

"The centaurs brought him. Some kind of emergency in Fanglethroft," shrugged the innkeeper as he served another ale to an off duty guard.

From the edge of his eye Hegel-thorn watched the halfling converse with Commander Gordon, who seemed on edge. Detecting a type of magic, he felt an exchange between them and the Commander was quick to dismiss the halfling and head towards Hegel-thorn.

"I must ask a favour," said Gordon, "Tomorrow this bard needs an escort to the King. Would you take him?" Gordon pointed towards the halfling and plopped

himself beside Hegel-thorn. "An ale!" He shouted out to the innkeeper who wasted no time to hydrate the lips of the Commander.

"With the King? You know I have an Ala on my hands Gordon. Can you not find another errand boy?"

The Commander nodded in understanding, "Moondog as he is called, knows of some horrible conspiracy. You are the fastest rider and frankly I believe King Hughes has a need for you in these matters," he declared.

"What business does a King have with a halfling?" Hegel-thorn tried to understand.

"Exactly, I will send a bird at sunrise to give him warning of your arrival. You are to leave here in the morning." Hegel-thorn raised his glass and looked into the brown eyes of the Commander. "For you old friend, I will ride to the King but I will not loiter in his courts. I too have business to attend to."

"Agreed." The Commander looked pleased. "Tonight is on me. Enjoy your stay old friend."