



The scheme had been concocted in the backroom of an old flophouse. Once he'd agreed Abraham didn't think the tattooing would be done there too.

He winced under the needle pricking his chest. Vo grunted, a nod of her head getting Kanter to clamp a steadying hand on the big man's shoulders. Cockroaches scurried along the walls. Beneath their feet scurried bright little silverfish. What scurried in the bedding was best not thought of.

"You're sure about this?" Abraham said as the tattooist's needle lanced his chest again. A question he'd repeated every step of the plan. "We could get in trouble. Real trouble."

The two fingers left on Kanter's hand tightened their grip.

"Sure I'm sure," the one-eyed man said, "It's not as if we're marching into the Queen's own capital and making a big show. We stick to the frontier circuit, fleece the rubes. A summer's work then we'll light out to the east."

"Easy for you to say, you aren't, hrk, getting the tattoo," Abraham tried not to look at where the needle worked on his chest, the hot tip dying his pink skin dark, leaving blood trails down his pecs with every needling prick. "Impersonating a war beast."

Kanter grinned, showing sore gums in the empty spaces of his missing teeth. Kanter had been an ugly man before he'd lost half his face to witch fire, his narrow, knotty face and small mean eyes, rimmed by a mane of black scraggly hair that gave him the look of a low-lands badger. The witch fire had taken one of those eyes and half his teeth, the flesh turned into a melted slurry where the bolt had hit him.

"No one will question it," he said, "No one would dare. Who would even think of impersonating a war beast? It would be madness, pure madness."

That's what Abraham had been saying. Madness. But Kanter had a way of making madness seem like hidden genius and a golden opportunity. The war had been over for a year, the war beasts scattered out of service. Who knew where they were now.

"What rune is it?" Abraham asked the tattooist, "Wolf rune? Bear?" He wouldn't mind either of those. He was big enough for a bear, though hairless all over since he'd been born.

Vo grunted, pulling back from her work. Dark skinned and black lipped, Vo pursed her lips over her work. "The only war beast I ever saw was Lord Stag," she said, "So it'll be a deer rune."

Abraham couldn't hide his disgust.

"A deer?" he sneered, "May as well be a frog or a porcupine." Kanter gave that odd hollow laugh of his while Vo looked up with an expression Abraham had seen more than once on a young woman. It was a face that asked, 'just how stupid are you?' with a mind already on the answer.

"I saw Lord Stag tear through a company of Hazanim pikes, and take the cannons at Ashkelon," she said. The pale long scar across her forearm spoke to some of that. "From a safe distance."

It was more conversation than he'd ever had out of her before, and was as much as he was going to get as she turned her slender dark eyes back down on her work.

"You've a point though, a deer rune don't inspire fear," Kanter said, "And we need that fear if we're going to get any respect. We'll tell folks you're a wolf. We'll tell them you're the big bad wolf himself. They won't know enough to say otherwise. And if they ask to see you transform we'll just say 'do you want to see this whole town mutilated? This ain't no innkeeper's fire rune. Everyone knows a war beast can't control themselves once the change is on'."

"It's a big risk," Abraham said, with him taking the biggest one.

"We're owed," Kanter said, "You ask me, we're owed. We fought their war and got nothing to show for it but one good hand and half a face. It ain't like we're going bandit. We take what they give to the big bad wolf, who gave up his very humanity to protect them, same as we gave up what we did to do the same, and they thank us for it then we move on. No one's getting hurt, no one's getting robbed. We live easy for a while is all."

There was a banked fury in his words. Fury for the cracked roof above their heads and the filth on the walls. Worse than a war camp. Worse than Abraham had ever lived before the idea of a gold mark a month had convinced him to pick up a spear for a lord he'd never met or much thought about before.

"There is that," Abraham said, seeing the sense in it again.

"And besides, what else are you going to do? God gave you some gifts, Abe, but not many brains."

"There's that too," he muttered, then jerked with another sharp wince under Vo's needle. "Are you nearly done?"

The dark woman didn't answer. She was a runesmith by trade, that's what Kanter said. Far as Abraham knew she'd never done a tattoo before. She kept working. Worked for another half hour.

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If there was ever a man who looked like a war beast unchanged it was Abraham Stoll. There were few men as tall as him, few as naturally big. His head was large and blocky with a strong square chin. But more than that he was entirely hairless, bald from the dome of his head down to his little pink toes. It was said war beasts took strange shapes after their first change, and Abraham had something of that look, though he'd been hairless since the day he'd been born and as big since a boy.

When Kanter found him an open necked tunic that let the tattoo show, and a long blue cape trimmed in black fur, with boots to match, he almost convinced himself of it when the little badger of a man held up a mirror for his inspection. Adding his old war sword over it, sheathed in red leather, the image was nearly complete.

Nearly. Except a tattoo wasn't a rune. Vo's work had been good. It had the right shape, like the markings found on mossy old stones in the far north, the ancient stones peasants still danced around come midsummer, crude engravings of ancient beasts dreamed up by fevered pagan imaginations. It could trick an eye while it stayed fresh, but time would fade it out and if anyone touched it they'd only touch raised skin instead of the carapace-like feel of an embedded rune. And the light didn't catch it the way it should. A rune had a soft warm glow in fire light.

He said as much to Kanter, pointing to Kanter's own wind rune on the back of his good hand and Abraham's matching one as well.

"Keep it covered most times then," Kanter said, toggling up the tunic for him, "When we're in company. And don't let anyone touch it."

Vo watched, pleased with her own handiwork. She always seemed pleased about something. Pleased with herself maybe.

If Abraham did not look like a war beast he at least looked like some barbarian prince, and the imaginations of the ignorant frontier peasants made one the picture of the other.

For Kanter's part he wore their old company livery, the red and yellow of Duke Ashmark's regiment. The colours a little faded, the gambeson stitched up with patches. With it a pair of corroded marching grieves and rusting steel gauntlets. He looked the image of what he was, a returned veteran of the Hazan wars. The gruesome smear of the left side of his face was partly covered by a scarlet patch stitched with a golden eye, but even tailored as it was there was no covering all of it.

Vo wore a simple red tunic and tall black boots, the image of a runesmith, with tools tucked away in the clasp bag at her hip. At least on that score she wasn't pretending. But an army

runesmith wasn't the same as the archmasters who had birthed these beasts. They had to hope no one would ask too many questions. He couldn't remember which company she said she had fought with. Kanter had found her, and he trusted Kanter.

Together they made his entourage. Probably the least strange of all those seen during the war. Rune beasts had gathered many a strangeling band around them during that long campaign. It would be stranger still for them to be too normal.

"Ready for your grand tour, Lord Wolf?" Kanter said.

Abraham struck his chin in the way he remembered Duke Ashmark doing, often right before ordering them up a wall. Airs were important. A lord's whole authority was based on airs. Airs could make a man run screaming up a hill into the teeth of a Hazan warlock's bodyguard. Airs and the swords of other men to make sure those orders were followed. Still, right now airs would have to do.

His gut gurgled with nerves, just like it did before going up a ladder or bracing for a charge. He'd learned to ignore that gurgle then. He ignored it now.

"What are we waiting for?" he said, "Let's go."

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The first village they hit was not his idea of the frontier circuit. He had expected muddy lanes and mean houses and significantly more pig shit. They rode in down a neat main street, with gardened lawns before well-to-do homes and a pleasant clean people ready to greet them.

Abraham rode the largest horse they could find. He needed it. It was no riding horse but a big clopping plough horse that stood shoulders taller than most men. He called the big gelding 'Sweetgrass'. It rode slow, which suited him fine. Vo rode a pony. She hadn't named it. Kanter, who hated horses, walked. He led the pack mule. He'd named it 'Duke Ashmark', which made Abraham grin through a held back chuckle.

"Good morning!" a man called to them. If there was a nervous energy to him it was only because of all the arms they carried. Abraham with his long-hilted war sword, Kanter with a vicious little falchion, and Vo with a long knife and slim crossbow besides it. "Come in from the Middle lands?" he asked it sincerely enough.

"By way of the Hazan shores," Kanter said. It was agreed he would speak. "I'm Kanter, herald of Lord Wolf."

He bowed to the townsman. The townsman's timidity only grew more visible as his red face turned a shade of white. "Lord Wolf is it?" he said, sneaking a glance up at Abraham.

That was the signal. Abraham unbuttoned the top of his tunic. Pulled it back to show the freshly tattooed 'rune' on his chest, the pagan symbol etched into his flesh.

"Yes, our Lord Wolf, returned from foreign shores," Kanter continued, "Many a Hazan warlock met his end beneath his jaws. Ah, the slaughter! The inhumanity! The sacrifice! All for the good of our kingdom and our young queen!"

Abraham frowned. Kanter was putting it on a bit thick. But the townsman's eyes grew large.

"A rune beast," he said.

"A war beast," Kanter said, his grin as much a leer, "Come home with what's left of his humanity. Now tell me sirrah, where could a man like our good Lord Wolf find a hot meal and perhaps a warm bed? We've almost forgotten the comfort of such things, after years of long campaigning."

The townsman pointed behind him. "Down...down to the end of this street. The Blue Pony is good. And I can...I will let them know you're coming! A war beast in Spring Hill!"

He ran, with some fear and not a little awe, to do just what he said, his day's task abandoned.

Kanter grinned back to Abraham high on his horse. A grin that said 'I told you so' but only got Abraham's frown in reply. His guts were only growing hotter, starting to curdle.

But he said nothing as he rode down the street, the image of a grim barbarian invading such a peaceable town. None of these streets had known the fire and blood of war, most of these faces were fresh and lively and clean. Safely nestled in the furthest fringes of the kingdom.

It made it easier, somewhat. Or at least easier to ignore his troubled stomach.

The Blue Pony was a handsome house. A stone base, tall plaster walls and a proper tiled roof, it had three storeys and a stable attached, tall windows that Abraham found fetching and a good clean sawdust smell that mixed with hot cooking that got his guts grumbling in a different way.

A young man came to get his horse.

"M'lord," he said with a nervous bow. Not a scar or sign of battle on him, Abraham threw him the reins to Sweetgrass.

"Take care of him," he grunted, leaving the threat unsaid.

They went inside.

Daylight through the tall windows kept it brightly lit, but there was a stone fire place against the far wall ready for when it was needed. Long tables sat old men finished with their life's work with some younger ones finished with their day, drinking a rich brown beer Abraham was ready to sample.

The townsman who had run ahead was now in furious conversation with the publican, a comfortably plump man in good tunic and hose with the sort of generous nature in his smile easy times could bring. A sort of nature Abraham had seen stamped out time and again in the teeth of war.

"Lord Wolf is it?" the publican said, "Welcome home, lad, and thank you."

He extended a hand to Abraham.

"Thank you?" Abraham asked, looking to Kanter. Kanter shrugged.

"Thank you, for choosing the Blue Pony, and for taking on that rune of yours. Musn't be easy to live with, giving up your soul to protect the kingdom."

"Right," Abraham said, looking from the generous faced publican back to Kanter. Kanter licked at his remaining teeth.

"Listen up!" the publican called to his taproom, "We have a hero here! A returned war beast! One of those great men who gave up everything to protect you lousy sods from those black magicians in the south! He won't be paying a mark tonight and neither will anyone pays his lodging!"

"Aye!" that got up a cheer, and lifted the place Abraham's eyebrows should have been. Kanter's own eyebrows wagged at him in such a frenzy he almost spoiled the show with a laugh.

The publican took his hand, and said with almost too thick a sentiment, 'Welcome home, son.'

Abraham was happy to escape that hand to a table Vo had procured, the man's warmth almost spoiling everything in a different way.

It wasn't long before rich meat was in front of them, and richer beer. They feasted like they hadn't since their victory in Shahad Mor, gorging themselves in the ruins of the warlock king's pantry.

Each stein of beer was ported out by a slim young woman in long green skirts and a scarlet bodice, her brown hair caught with reddish hues in the sunlight, twined back in long tails away from her pale freckled face and down her back. Another appetite rose in Abraham at the sight of her, watching her close as she came and went.

When was the last time he'd been with a woman he hadn't had to pay? He gulped down a pull of beer. Too long.

People came and went, curious for the sight of a war beast. It must have been the most exciting thing to ever happen in Spring Hill. How embarrassed would they be if they ever discovered he was a fraud?

Hours went by with gallons of beer down his throat and endless prattle in his ears. Abraham was reaching his limit of beer and talk when at last a suspicious face interjected, "But is he -really- a war beast?"

The man had that sour face of a natural skeptic, thin nosed with a high forehead and lips that had a natural smugness.

"Show us it, let's see your rune," he said.

"Who are you to ask?" Kanter said, a little woozy for all his own drinking.

"That's Alvin Lee, the local runesmith," Master Drumm, the publican said. He didn't seem happy to see him. Few in the Blue Pony did. A good man, Master Drumm, or so Abraham thought.

"I've always been curious about the process," the runesmith continued. He had on his right hand a rune of warding and on the left a rune of water. Gardener's runes, not meant for war. Most people had a rune or two, but only enough magic to make their day a little lighter. A fire rune for making a quick kitchen fire, a wind rune to help with the cleaning, a water rune to keep the crops fresh. War runes were a different thing, and nothing about Alvin Lee said he knew much about them either. "Show us then, show us this unholy rune."

Abraham gawped, unsure what to say, mostly wanting to drive his fist into the Runesmith's smug fat lips.

It was Vo came to the rescue. Her words were sharp as drawn daggers, her glare the same. "Those secrets belong only to the archmasters," she said, "Make the sign if you know it, or shut the fuck up."

It did the trick, though the proud country runesmith didn't like it.

"It's practically treason just to ask," Kanter added, matching the thwarted runesmith for smugness. Master Drumm hurried him along.

"War beast," the incredulous little man said over his shoulder.

Goodbye, smug pest. Abraham grinned over his beer.

The day was over and the fireplace lit. A gleeman had struck up a lively tune.

"Is it true a war beast can only be killed by witch steel?"

It was the pretty barmaid asked as she was clearing away their steins.

"Witch steel, or witch fire," Kanter said, "Otherwise our Lord Wolf is impervious to all harm."

"It may kill them, but it doesn't slow them much," Vo said. She had drunk near as much as Kanter, which meant half as much as Abraham. Rather than beer though she knocked back hard cider. It had her dark cheeks darker. "I saw it. Lord Stag. Bathed in witch fire. Burning to death. But it didn't slow him. Not a bit. He was on his killers and tore that cabal apart, every one of those warlocks all torn apart. All while burning to death himself."

She finished what she said and stared a while. Then took a hard swig of her cider.

"And if you changed," the barmaid continued, "Changed right here, right in our little Blue Pony. What then?"

"Then," Abraham said, keeping his tone as serious as the beer would allow, "Come morning. There wouldn't be a living soul left in Spring Hill."

"So you really can't tell who your friends are?" she asked, stopping now to perch on the edge of the table.

"All there is, is a red mist," he said, "And the bodies when I come too. Is there anything else you want to know?"

"I've heard," she said, and bit back a smile while looking away from him, "Other things as well."

"What other things?" he said, trying to hold back his grin.

"Private things," she said, "Dirty things. Bedroom things."

He chuckled. "Don't believe everything you hear," he said, then slid a big hand up to that slim waist of hers.

"There's a boy I'm seeing," she said with paper thin conviction.

"And where is he now?" Abraham asked, teasing her with a squeeze of his grip. She blushed but didn't bat him away. "Some things need to be discovered for yourself."

She stared a moment. Then made a small swallow of her throat.

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"Oh God, oh God!" she prayed hard into the pillow, face down and trying to hold back her moans and failing against his hard thrusts. She'd seemed slim in her skirts and bodice, but she was fat

in all the places Abraham liked, and slick against the throbbing length of his cock, gliding in and out of her, deep enough to make that round arse bounce.

The headboard banged hard against the wall and that sweet voice of hers only rose higher in her throat, until it suddenly dropped into hard guttural little sounds punctuated with swears he doubted she even realized she knew.

He'd never known a girl so hot and slick for him. Paid whores could sound better but there was no faking the velvet wet purse her pussy had become, greedy for him. He gripped her slim waist and gave her every inch, riding her hard until his hairless skin became glazed with sweat.

Maybe real war beasts never tired, but he did, and it wasn't long before he left his seed leaking from her and into the good linen bed sheets so generously supplied by the Blue Pony.

She gasped into the pillow, knotting it in her fingers, lips puffing with bliss. He grunted above her, chest heaving. They gasped together in the afterglow, skin sheening with sweat.

"M'name's Emmeline," she muttered.

"Abraham," he gasped, then bent over her. Turned her dainty chin in his thick fingers. He wanted what couldn't be paid for.

Her sucking kiss was far from innocent.

It roused him enough. And to her delight he went again.

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Morning came soon after Abraham did. Leaving Spring Hill was the first order of business. Abraham left Emmeline on the bedsheets, eyes a flutter as pleasure slipped her into sleep. Tunic, hose, belt and sword. He dressed quickly.

It was always the plan to leave the morning after, to not tarry too long in any one place. But he was sad to part with the pretty barmaid. How long had it been since the last time he hadn't had to pay for it? Maybe ever. He'd been fighting the war since he'd been a boy. A large boy but still a boy.

No time for regrets now. If anything when he whistled his way downstairs it was with a good feeling. Kanter's scheme was working, and the rewards were richer than he had hoped.

He found Kanter and Vo already up.

"Had fun?" Kanter asked, while Vo just smiled, "Let's go. We need to be out of here."

They went to the stables, and Kanter wasted no time rousing the stable boy with heavy kicks.

"Get our horses saddled you waste! You'll not leave Lord Wolf waiting!" he snapped, and the hay haired servant bolted to get it done.

By the time the morning sun had fully bloomed, bringing light and colour to the world, they were already well down the road and away from Spring Hill.

It was only then Kanter counted the coin he'd stolen.

"Straight from the Blue Pony strongbox," he said, "While you were fucking the barmaid into a sweet puddle, I was getting our pay."

Abraham frowned. "You didn't tell me you were going to rob the place," he said, then looked to Vo, "Did you know he was going to rob the place?"

Her smile said as much.

"Don't sound so wounded," Kanter snapped, "You came through last night well enough. It's only fair Vo and I get our own reward. And you'll get your cut, don't you worry."

"You never looted during the war?" Vo asked.

Abraham's jaw tightened. "That's different. That was war."

"And unlike during the war, this time no one got hurt," Kanter said.

There was no point arguing. No point even grumbling when Kanter handed him his share, a handsome purse of gold marks. More money than they had seen since coming home. More money than Duke Ashmark had promised then failed to pay them. A purse full of gold and the memory of Emmeline's bouncy arse. Not bad, really.

But unfortunately for them, that was the last of their good fortune.

The next town had no bouncy little Emmeline or handsome Blue Pony Inn. It was the frontier town he had first expected, with muddy lanes for streets and suspicious faces lurking from mean dank homes. They were curious enough to see a war beast, but had no money spare for generosity or much interest in war stories. The drinks still came free though, and the attention of haggard women who sold their fading looks for a moment's pleasure.

For now Abraham kept it to his hand and memories of Emmeline.

"You had your war, but we've troubles of our own," a forester said over her pot of coarse beer, the tavern thick with fire pit smoke and the rancid stench of curing hides. A scar held together the left side of her face, and her eyes were cold grey flint when she said, "There's lurklings about."

Lurklings. Abraham shivered as Kanter met the news with a skeptical grin. Lurklings. His mother had warned him about lurklings. They lived under mountains only to ride out at midnight, murdering all good folk they could find.

The towns after that was just as bad, and farther again from it. Each town farther apart than the last, and meaner too, until a day of travel between one town and the next became a week, and the 'towns' were practically camps, camps in the shadow of the mountains where men worked the forests for game or the streams for gold but often came away with nothing but hunger and misery.

It did seem a land for lurklings.

Vo looked around the camp as they rode through it. Faces looked up from cook fires. Grimey unwashed faces. A woman bent over her washing scrubbed furiously, jowls jiggling as behind her a clutch of pale faced children peered out from a tent flap. A dog barked somewhere out of sight, its furious barking unrelenting until forced to end by a sharp kick, giving up a high pitched whine in answer to a master's furious shout. Someone yelled 'fucking dog!' No one rose to greet the strangers as they rode in.

At the centre of the camp stood a long pavilion, with a sign set before it, words painted in red. 'Welcome to Hardscrabble'.

Abraham nearly missed it on account of the other sign, hanging from a pole mounted by a malformed skull.

"When we first came there were lurklings here. Now we've killed them all, so give a cheer!"

The skull's eye holes were too large to be human, the teeth sharp fangs like a cat's. A bit of scalp still clung to the pate of the skull, coarse black tufts sticking up from the yellowing bone.

Lurkling. Abraham shivered.

"We should ride on," Vo said, her nose twitching.

Kanter scowled. "I'm done walking," he said, "I need a night to sit, and sleep under a roof. No, we're staying. Mean as it is, we can make something out of it." Squaring his shoulders as he marched for the pavilion.

Abraham got down off Sweetgrass. Right as he did the flaps of the pavilion flew open, and out skidded the meanest beggar he'd last laid eyes on. Sweetgrass bucked beside him with a surprised whine, hooves lashing. The man put his hands up to cover his face.

"Please, no," he mumbled, "Sorry, sorry."

Lank black hair covered a gaunt greasy face, his tunic undyed and belted by rope. He wore no shoes.

“Sorry,” he said, scurrying past.

“Wait now!” Abraham called, tempted to throw the poor beggar one of his ill won gold coins. If ever there was a soul needed a kindness done, it was that poor soul staggering out into the night.

Kanter blew a raspberry. “There’s your problem Abe, too kind hearted.”

Kanter took their horses to a hitching post, then gestured to the flaps of the pavilion.

It might have been a lord’s field tent once, the kind could house his entire household on campaign or at a tourney. It had seen better days, and better occupants.

“Shall we?”

For once he understood Vo’s glance. This was a bad idea.

Inside where a lord might have once dined, attended by his servants, instead was a makeshift tap room with tables of crude lumber carved straight from the forest set up as benches. There was music playing, a lute set with bawdy lyrics, a woman singing while dancing low. She wasn’t much to look at but she knew how to swing her hips.

A pig roasted on a spit, with the citizens of the camp around it freely cutting away slices. Kegs of coarse beer flowed.

Rough, but no rougher than a war camp. They were used to war camps.

Few of the men and even the women went without scars. Some were missing fingers. One lacked an arm. Kanter was still the most gruesome face in the room but for once he had stiff competition.

No one seemed to mind their coming in. Something like an official presented himself. A slim, hard looking man with the look of Hazan in his tightly curled black hair.

“Welcome to Hardscrabble,” he said, holding out a hat, “Half silver mark or a nugget of gold and you can take as you please. We’ve pallets for sleeping but no dividers for privacy, begging your pardon.”

He said that last to Vo, who shrugged.

“Anywhere to bathe?” Kanter asked, scratching at himself.

“There’s a river not far but I don’t recommend it,” he said, “Bears and such. You’re as like to get it as clean.”

“Explains the stink,” he said, “I’m Kanter, this is Vo.”

“I’m Mehdin,” he said, and shook Kanter’s bad hand.

Kanter nodded to Abraham, which was the signal.

“And this,” he said as Abraham unbuttoned his tunic, “Is Lord Wolf.”

He fluffed the collar of the tunic so the rune tattoo showed.

Mehdin stared for a moment. Then nodded. “Lord Wolf is it? Whatever you are, out here you either work or go hungry. It’s not called Hardscrabble for nothing.”

It was the most muted response they had received.

“Our Lord Wolf,” Kanter said, “Who single handedly took down the Ashkeloni Cabal at the Battle of Burimin.” Abraham didn’t remember that lie.

“Killing warlocks is doing God’s business,” Mehdin said, “Now a half silver in the hat or fuck off, war beast or no.”

Kanter looked ready to go for his falchion, but Abraham put a full gold mark in the hat before he could.

“Beer, and some pork,” he said.

Mehdin grinned. It was better coinage than must have been seen in this camp for a month. “Right away sir.”

They took a bench. No one bothered them as Mehdin sliced them up a meal, brought it over with pots of beer.

“Help yourselves until you’re sick, it isn’t much but there’s plenty of it,” he said, setting down the trays.

Once he had gone Vo hissed, “We should move on.”

But Kanter already had off a boot and was massaging the foot with his two good fingers.

"Tomorrow," he said, "I need to rest. Unlike you I walked the whole damn way."

"This is a bad place," she said, "I can feel it. It's in the-"

A shadow fell over them.

"Air," Vo finished.

They looked up to a woman. Blonde with long hair unbound to her shoulders, she had rounded heavy shoulders and a solid torso. Her blue coat, unbuttoned, didn't hide her powerful arms. She had the cleanest face they'd seen in camp, and the smell of cut flowers about her. She took a seat without asking.

"You're Lord Wolf?" she asked.

Looking at her Abraham could tell she wasn't one for smiling. She had a handsome face, but it had a sour cast, and her eyes...

Her eyes were gold. Not yellow but gold, like the eyes of a cat in the night. Unnerving eyes.

"I am," he mumbled.

"And that's your rune," she said.

She reached to the top button of her tunic, and popped it.

"This is mine."

The amber rune on her chest caught the light from the fire pit and glowed. But beneath the glow was a dark shadow. A dark shadow like the pagan markings etched into ancient stone in the cold far north. The stones peasants still danced around. And in ancient days, made sacrifice to.

"Lord Wolf," she said, voice thick with scorn.

Clean yourself down by the river, but be careful or you might get et. Of course she was the only clean face here. There was no bear born could kill a war beast.

None of the trio spoke, for once even Kanter had no words.

"Where did you lose your face?" she asked Kanter, lip pulled back in a sneer.

"Jabiru," he said.

She sniffed the air. "Now that smells of truth," she said, "Jabiru. And those are Duke Ashmark's colours. So you were at Jabiru. My brother was there too. He died there."

"Lord Stag," Vo said.

The woman nodded.

"You were all at Jabiru," she said, "Tell me then. How he died. Tell it good and I might not eat you." Might not.

"We didn't see it," Kanter said, easing a little into the story, "Abraham and I. We were with Duke Ashmark on the left flank, getting hard fucked by witch fire and Hazan cannons. Duke Ashmark decided to make himself famous. If you fought you know what that means. He decided we should make him famous ourselves by taking the high ground where the cannons were entrenched. But never mind the fucking Hazan spears in the way, or the fucking warlock at their head."

"Duke says go, we go," Abraham said, his tone flat.

"Cunt of a duke," Kanter growled, "And we went we did. A gang of fools. I was a serjeant then, kicking raw boys straight under the millstone. Scared boys who didn't know what they'd signed up for. I'd tell you we did something grand and heroic. Took the cannons on the hill and killed the cunt warlock and saved the day, but truth is I got a face full of witch fire early and would have died if Abraham here hadn't pulled me back to the surgeons. I don't remember the rest of the day except the pain, and when I came too the next day I was as you see me. This thing."

Kanter stared long at nothing, a thick line of drool hanging from his bottom lip on a face contorted with hate and pain.

"It was a bad day," Abraham said. Kanter got hit by witch fire meant for him. Put himself between them without thinking.

The gold eyed war beast nodded.

"He was brave," Vo said, "Lord Stag."

"You saw it?" she asked.

Vo nodded. Now she gave words, more than Abraham had ever heard from her. She spoke to save their lives.

"He did what they all said he did, but...it was before he went that made him brave. I was with Count Selwyn. We were sent to follow Lord Stag into battle. Give him a breach. But the Cabal

knew their work. Rune magic is strong but a linked cabal is a different power. We were no match but his lordship, Selwyn that is, wouldn't relent. Wouldn't abandon the mission or Lord Stag."

"They were friends," the war beast said, like it was some grand mystery, "Patrick was always making friends."

"It was Lord Stag ordered us to retreat. Said he would cover us. We didn't think he'd go alone. Once we had made a safe distance he changed. Right there for all to see, and made a lone charge for the heart of the cabal. They bathed him in witch fire, roasted him much like that pig over yonder, but he didn't slow."

"Nothing stops a charging rune beast," the woman said with bitter pride, "We're thunderstorms made flesh."

"He broke the Cabal, and the Hazanim were routed soon after."

The woman let out a deep sigh. "That's as much as Selwyn told me," she said, "Though not half as long winded. The man can talk." She looked to the roof of the pavilion, and with those strange eye turned away Abraham was struck by how normal she looked. Tall and well-muscled for a woman, yes, but in no way the instrument of destruction the rune had made her.

"Jabiru," she said, "How I wish I'd been there."

Then those golden eyes came back down on them, and Abraham saw it. In those eyes he saw what he was. He was weak. He was prey. He was meat. And there was nothing he could do to stop her if she were to reach out one of those rippling arms and pluck his life away.

He couldn't hold her stare. He looked away, and heard her scoff.

"When I came here, there were still lurklings in the mountains," she said, "That's why I came. After fighting in Hazan for so long, fighting other human beings, killing them, I thought fighting lurklings might be different. They aren't people like you're people. Slaughtering them, it might be different. That's what I thought."

She went silent and stared long at the rough surface of the forest cut table.

"And were you right?" Vo asked.

She smiled. A smile to make Abraham's guts curdle hot. "Oh yes. They aren't like humans at all. No. They aren't half as delicious." Those golden eyes on him. "Not half." She took his beer and chugged it dry, put it back down in front of him. "A wolf knows a wolf," she said, "And you're a bunch of lambs. Delicious little lambs. But you were at Jabiru. So consider this your only warning. If I hear word of you pretending to be one of us again, you'll end up shat out by the river."

She turned her bared teeth on Vo. "And you. Sometimes I fuck lambs before I eat them. If they're delicious enough."

Vo swallowed. "Lady Wolf," she said.

Her grin turned cocky. "Now you know me, and I know you, and its best you don't stay long," she said, "But you come to my bed tonight, and I'll show you the truth of those war beast stories you heard."

Abraham had never seen Vo so flustered, breath baited, shy.

"I think we'll just go," Kanter said, getting up. Lady Wolf shrugged, but her gold eyed grin stayed fixed on Vo. "A long way to walk." But Vo didn't move, caught in that golden stare. Kanter scowled. "Suit yourself. Come on Abraham."

Lady Wolf then turned those eyes on him. "No need for you to leave, big man," she said, "I've got a large appetite."

Caught by those eyes Abraham froze. Hot fear ran through him. Heat pumping through him. Her grin. Blood rising in him.

"Come on, Abe," Kanter grabbed him with his two good fingers and pulled.

Whatever it was held him ensnared broke then, and he stumbled after Kanter.

"Long way to go," Abraham mumbled as he followed Kanter, "Catch up with us if you can, Vo. Bring Sweetgrass when you do."

Kanter hit the tent flaps at a hard walk nearly turning into a run. He half drew his falchion then let it slide back into its sheath. The air was cooler outside the pavilion, and the air near sweet after being freed from its stink.

"Fucking Vo," he hissed, "Fucking war beast."

Abraham jogged after him, catching up to Kanter muttering to himself, turning his single eyed glare on the night dark camp, swinging his head around to get it all in.

"Ruined a good thing, like they're the only ones that sacrificed," he muttered, "It's our turn. It's our turn. It's our fucking turn!"

"Easy Kanter," Abraham said.

“Easy, easy, easy!” Kanter spat, kicking at nothing, “It’s never fucking easy! When does it get easy? We had something, now what are we? A cripple and an idiot! With our runesmith off getting her nothing filled by a monster’s tongue! God, fuck, when does it get easy?”

He stomped his way to the edge of the camp.

“Should we be going out at night?” Abraham said, “There could be bears, or lurklings.”

“Hear yourself,” Kanter sneered, “You’re big as a bear yourself but you really are a fucking lamb. Scared of everything. You meek little shit.”

“Kanter,” Abraham said, soldier flat. Time for Kanter to be careful. Abraham owed him some and was his friend as well, but there were limits. And Kanter had enough sense to see those limits being reached.

“Sorry,” his apology was tough and forced, but it was enough for Abraham. Kanter still didn’t stop, stamping away from the camp. Having a tantrum.

And there could be bears out there. Or Lurklings. It would be safer for Kanter if he went with him.

So he did. Even if he thought maybe it was a sore substitute compared to a hot bed, and a pair of women filling it.

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They worked a ways until the sounds of the camp disappeared and it was nothing but the forest at night.

Abraham thought they were going the right way, but it was hard making out the stars through the trees. Kanter had stopped muttering to himself at least.

It reminded him of being on sentry duty. Walking the midnight watch. The same spikes of fear fighting tiredness and boredom. They could have been back in Hardscrabble and left in daylight. Hopefully Vo did catch up with them. She was likely to, they wouldn’t get far in the dark and without horses.

They stuck to the trail. Too easy to get lost otherwise, and neither of them knew these woods enough to risk that.

Lurklings. Abraham shivered. He really was a meek heart. Always had been. War had toughened him some. He’d done what he’d been ordered to. Killed when he had to. But he’d been scared the whole of the time. Every day scared there’d be no tomorrow. No getting home. No getting home for any of them. It wasn’t just the fear of dying but the fear of what the war had turned them into.

Not quite people anymore but apes pretending to be people. Happy to kill the bastards over there, happy to burn their towns and rape their girls and joke about it all afterword. More than dying that had scared him, even as he did it. Cruelty comes easy to the scared.

He was scared now. In the dark.

There could be lurklings.

"Hear that?" Kanter said. He'd stopped in the middle of the road.

"What?" Abraham said, going for his sword.

"Sounds like..." Kanter said.

"She shouldn't have let you go."

A man's voice. And now he was there, as if he had always been there, slumped against the trunk of the tree as if he had been carved from its side. His head low, eyes red rimmed on a gaunt face. Green eyes, bright as emeralds with an emerald glow.

Abraham knew him. Had seen him. Back in Hardscrabble, he'd been the mean beggar kicked out of the pavilion. In undyed wool and with a rope for a belt. He seemed taller in the dark. A trick of the shadow maybe. As tall as Abraham. He hadn't seen his eyes. In the camp. He hadn't seen the green glow of his eyes. Bright now in the dark.

"Pretending," he said, "Pretending to be one of us."

"Lady Wolf said-" Kanter started.

"I'm not Lady Wolf," the beggar said. He didn't look angry. Sad, if anything. "She shouldn't have let you leave. She knows how I get. It's hard you know. The beast is always there. Always there. Always hungry. And letting it out. Letting it out." He sobbed. "It feels so good to let it out."

Taller. It was no trick of the dark. He was taller. And growing taller still. Taller than Abraham by head and shoulders.

He froze there as the beggar grew. They had never seen a war beast. Had never seen a war beast change.

"God," the word came out a hush from Kanter.

The beggar sobbed. A clump of lank greasy hair fell from his head, hitting the ground with a wet splat. Skin on his cheek began to boil and bubble, then slough away like melting wax. Scales gleamed beneath the hot slurry of dripping flesh. The pop of vertebrae as his neck lengthened,

his jaw cracking as it began to jut forward, all of it cracking and refixing itself into a pointed muzzle. His wretched sob as he spat up white teeth, and from raw gums burst iron fangs, his own blood leaking down his jaw.

The tunic tore open to show the amber rune affixed his chest, the chest itself billowing out, broadening to impossible dimensions. Abraham couldn't think. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't move as the beggar became a thing of fervent pagan imagination. Something unholy. Something that shot terror to the core of Abraham's own animal self that left him a babbling shrieking terrified monkey in his own mind.

"She should have kept you away!" Tears dried from eyes that lost all reason.

Lord Dragon flopped forward onto clawed hands, and let out a hiss, iron fangs dripping with dirty venom. A tail ripped forth from its arse, lashing out as it went from a stump out to whip length, cracking against a tree.

"I'm sorry," Abraham bubbled, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Sorry having dared to pretend to be this. Pretend to be living thunder.

The beggar's jaws snapped open to hiss, jaw coated in that venomous saliva. Nothing left of the beggar's mind to understand words like 'sorry'. Nothing left to understand things like fear left at all. The only fear now was in Abraham.

But he was used to being scared.

"Kanter!" Abraham roared, "Run!" He drew his war sword. The patter of Kanter's feet told the story. Abraham stared at the dragon. His heart beating too fast it seemed not to beat at all.

He had climbed siege ladders and broke pike walls. He had weathered witch fire. He had fought long bloody years on a foreign coast on behalf of a queen who never knew him and a kingdom that never cared.

Maybe he could kill a fucking dragon too. His wind rune glowed on the back of his hand. Rushed to life, its power coursing through him.

The war beast lunged. His sidestep was a blur, the wind rune granting him unnatural speed. A soldier's rune. His sword came down on the long thick neck. The edge bit deep, into its scales and opening them up. Thick dark blood bubbled beneath his steel. He wrenched the blade out then swung back down again, deepening the cut into the grey meat of its neck.

But then the dragon moved too.

Its neck rotated with his sword blade still in it, and jerked the hilt from his hands. It rolled across the dirt, contorting its body around, lashing out with clawed hands that tore open his tunic and the meat of his chest in a single swipe as he grasped at the hilt now impossibly out of reach.

It scratched at its neck until it ripped his sword free, the length of steel thumping on the dirt road. It might as well have fallen on the moon for the good it did Abraham.

Then it turned on him, hissing. Crawling hand over hand toward him. Abraham he backed up. His chest wet, he looked down for a glance at the horror of his flesh fallen away, blood pumping through bleeding muscle. It had ripped the tattoo straight off his skin, ripped the skin straight off his chest. How red he was underneath that thin layer of skin.

It snapped wet jaws at him again, this time with a foul glee. The wound on its neck restitched itself before his eyes.

Witch steel or witch fire, and he had neither. Its neck whipped out and it snapped its jaws. He brought his arm up to cover his face. Pointless instincts. The jaws bit down right on his forearm, right on his wind rune. He screamed as it bit through, the wet rip of his own muscles tearing soon giving way to the crunch of his bones and then the horrible pop of the jaws meeting in the middle, the numb rush of too much pain as his forearm came free from his elbow.

Cold. All at once he was cold, staring at the stump of his own arm.

Oh God. He could have been in the middle of a hot fuck instead. He could have stayed in Spring Hill with Emmeline. He could have told Kanter to go fuck himself with his stupid scheme. He could have done so many other things.

He stared at the blood pumping from the stump of his arm, could smell the venom bubbling in the wet meat of it, and beyond it saw the great lizard throw his forearm up into the air, his own hand limp at the wrist and waving, wind rune glimmering in the dark, then caught it in its jaws as it came down, swallowing it up rune and all.

Then those dead lizard eyes on him again. Green eyed with black slits.

And there was no point running.

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Kanter ran.

Brave fucking idiot.

He wheezed. Willed himself to run faster. He'd burned out his own wind rune getting away from there. Had to run. Get back to Hardscrabble. Get back to Lady Wolf. Maybe she'd protect him. Stop that monster.

She'd given him a warning.

It wasn't fucking fair.

Brave idiot. Staying behind like that. Who asked him to do that? Fucking idiot. Always had been. Brave sweet idiot.

He wheezed. Lungs burning. Stupid.

He tripped. Hit the dirt. Hard on the chin, it went numb. Could taste blood. He spat it out. Pushed himself up. On his bad hand.

It gave out. He hit the dirt again. Fucking idiot.

He heard it then and his thoughts died.

A low croon. The rustle of scrub. He didn't want to look. Didn't want to look back. Had to though. He turned his head.

It crawled towards him, crooning. Half a man and half a great lizard, tail lashing, scales a vile dark green. Its maw stained red. Lord Dragon. They said his bite couldn't be healed. They said it was death as sure as anything. Arms too long and gangly, made him move like a marionette. Like one of those puppets Kanter'd seen on the coast. The girl behind the puppet. Cute kid. He'd smiled at her and she'd flinched. They all flinched.

Funny thought to have now.

"Please," Kanter said, "I was at Jabiru."

But Lord Dragon had no understanding of words like 'please' or 'Jabiru'. He had no understanding now at all. Now he was a beast. And a beast knew one thing only.

And when Lord Dragon lunged Kanter's screams meant nothing. Nothing but a primal joy at the squirming, squealing thing caught between his teeth. The thing that shrieked as he ripped open its belly and gleefully flung its innards out across the dirt. Moaned as it gulped them up. A delicious screaming thing just like the other delicious screaming thing before it.

He ripped and tore and ate until the screaming stopped.

Then burped. Pleased with himself.

Then he dragged himself away. Down into the underbrush scrapping through the leaves fat and happy leaving behind only a greasy stain and the silence of the forest.