

THE WOLF OF HELOCENE

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Edited Extract

Broad and deep, the great Llansor forest nestled in a shallow valley, wreathed in mist and darkness. It was an ancient wood and it held ancient secrets, hidden in the knotted skin of trees, buried beneath the mouldered bracken, entombed under rock and thick moss. The forest was a kingdom of twilight; its denizens were trees and shadows, and black things that fed on its undergrowth and drank from its fetid pools. The old, gnarled trees were tightly packed; so much so that snow could not penetrate the canopy of bare branches that formed a weave high above them. Bracken covered the forest floor, and the barely-discernable pathway was slick with mulch. Sounds were different here too – the hidden forest creatures cast echoes amongst the trees. The mist grew thicker the deeper Arna rode, and an ancient smell of peat and rotting foliage began to invade her nostrils. It became impossible to tell how much ground she had covered, and whether she was nearer to the exit than the entrance, although it felt to Arna that she was now at the heart of the forest. Either way, the light was fading fast. She stopped and listened intently. Beside Krespen and Ivrey, all was quiet. Wind. Birdcall, but very distant. That was all. She lifted the water skin to her lips; apart from a drop that rimmed the drinking hole it was empty. She looked about her and took in the dank and untamed woodland. A new sensation struck her: she realised that, for the first time in her life, she was truly alone. No-one was nearby to

help her – not Ernest, nor her mother, nor any other villagers. She was surrounded by the huge expanse of wild wood and, if truth were told, completely at its mercy – if it even possessed such a thing. And as that thought sank into her and chilled her bones, she caught sight of something amongst the trees. Movement, from many directions. Shapes like black flames gliding through the naked woodland – which now resembled a deformed forest of bone. Then Arna heard the calls begin to echo through the dusk, just as Old Ernest had described them – an utterly plaintive union of a crow’s caw and a woman’s shriek. Yet these calls had a disturbing musical quality to them – they were almost sung. Each call was held for many moments, and together they created a shrill, unholy symphony that made her senses retreat, snail-like. It was her worst fear made flesh – she was being hunted by the Kurne. And where was Ivrey? She could not see him any longer. Screaming his name did not help – the hound did not come, did not bark a reply. But the keening of the Kurne grew louder and higher in pitch. Barely thinking, she set off again and urged Krespen onwards. A quick glance either side told her that the Kurne were able to keep to her pace. Suddenly Krespen reared; Arna gripped the reins but slipped from the saddle. She fell hard onto the rot-black forest floor. Dazed, she looked about and saw a huge moss-covered tree trunk, roots in the air like petrified tentacles, blocking her way. The figures in the mist were drawing nearer; she saw them boil forth from the trees like black fog, heard their wheezing as twigs snapped underfoot all about her. Looking frantically around she saw something – the faintest of lights far in the distance, beyond the dense tangle of trees. She scrambled to her feet, climbed back into the saddle and pointed Krespen towards it. They swerved around trunk and thicket, branches scratching at her hair and face like dead hands. The light was glowing brighter. She urged her horse on, even though his haunches were frothy with sweat. The Kurne were converging on her; they seemed to have her encircled. But she would not stop, not now. She could see a small, rough stone cottage in the distance, and a lantern hanging outside it. This must be the Kurne-house Old Ernest had mentioned; if she could reach it, she would

be safe. Krespen swerved again, this time past claws and needle-sharp fangs. Another felled log blocked their way, but she forced her mount to confront it, hanging on for dear life as he made the jump. Twig and bracken slashed at their legs, but Krespen cleared the tree and landed well. The Kurne house was now before them, and wood smoke curled from its chimney – the cottage was already occupied. Nevertheless, Arna leapt from her horse, tethered him to the nearest tree, and ran to the cottage door. It was locked. She turned to see the Kurne emerge from the forest like misshapen black roots. Arna bashed the door with her fist and screamed. She could almost feel the Kurne's breath on her. "Help! Let me in. Damn you, open the door," she yelled.

With only moments to spare, the door swung open and she fell inwards. Then it slammed shut and was bolted from within.

Almost as soon as she was safe inside, Arna leapt towards the door and tried to open it. "My horse is outside! I must protect him from those creatures."

A pair of hands pulled her back and away from the door.

"Your horse will be safe," a voice said. "The Kurne have no quarrel with animals, they will not harm your horse. It is only humans they seek to destroy."

She turned and saw a man sitting opposite her. He was tall, and clad entirely in black. His torso was bound in plates and buckles of black leather, with pouches and bags hanging from various bindings. Beneath his cuirass was a black tunic, which was open at the neck and sleeves. He wore loose-fitting pants and tall leather boots. A massive black cape was clasped across his chest. He was well-armed: knives and a dagger were on his belt, and a sword and longbow lay at his side.

"Who are you?" asked Arna, backing into a corner.

"You can call me Morkos. And for better or worse, I am your companion in this half-way house tonight."