The Bear

By Michael E. Shea

The air exploded in a flash of bone and steel and blood. The clash of metal rang through the forest. An arrow pierced through the darkness, its barbed head tearing through flesh and muscle. A roar echoed off of the mountains far to the west. A cry broke through soon after. Then silence.

Char stood over a pile of black fur and red blood. He held a curved sword, jagged half way down the wide blade and hilted in bone. He held a large thick bow in the other. Lorfel and Ranur stood behind him, panting. Lorfel, a short man of twenty six held a large axe in both hands and still prepared to swing it hard. Ranur, the largest of the three held a pike in one hand, its tip hanging low towards the ground. He buried his other hand in his gray tunic.

"Did it get either of you?" Char's voice rasped low in the silence of the night.

"No" Lorfel said. He planted his axe head on the ground with a thud and leaned on the tall handle. There was a pause. Char turned towards Ranur.

"Are you hurt?"

"Mm...My hand." Ranur took his hand out of his tunic. Moonlight gleamed red off of the ragged wound. Char thought he saw a glimmer of bone.

"Did he claw you or bite you?" Char's voice held an urgency that set both Lorfel and Ranur on edge.

Ranur paused and then spoke low. "He bit me."

Char picked Lorfel and Ranur as his hunting partners for their speed and sharpness in battle. They had hunted beasts of the deep woods all of their lives. They hunted the beasts that hunted men. They all knew the risks of battling such creatures. The old man dropped his curved sword, drew his bow, and fired. The arrow hammered into Ranur's chest, burying itself in his heart. Lorfel saw the gleaming arrow head sticking almost a foot out of his companion's back. Ranur fell face first to the ground.

Char's eyes locked onto Lorfel. The old man expected the shock in Lorfel's eyes at the death of their friend. Yet Char saw something else in the man's eyes; something he did not recognize. Char narrowed his eyes. Lorfel kept his gaze on the old man, not looking down or away. Char lowered his bow and turned toward the massive black-furred body on the ground and then realized what he had missed. Lorfel's leg was bleeding.

The delay was the chance Lorfel needed. Lorfel hurled the axe underhand from its rested position. It soared towards Char's head. The old man, seeing the movement in the corner of his eyes, tilted back as the massive blade of the axe cut across. The blade missed him by four inches but the handle hit him solid in the side of the head. Blackness closed in as he reached for another arrow. Lorfel was gone.

Lorfel ran south throughout the night and half way into the next day. Char had hunted these beasts for forty years and Lorfel had no doubt that the old man would find him if he didn't move fast. The wound in his leg throbbed but he ran anyway. At the midday sun Lorfel stopped. He itched all over. Lorfel pulled back the hasty bandage he had wrapped around his leg earlier and saw the severity of the wound. Lorfel had pulled his leg up just as the beast's jaw clamped down. One tooth dragged a line across his left calf. Now the wound was black. Dark veins spidered across his lower leg. The blood around the wound felt thick and sticky like syrup. Dark hair sprouted on his arms, chest, and legs in alarming rates. His muscles ached horribly. Five hours later in the last conscious thought Lorfel ever had, he wished Char had fired that arrow into him. Two weeks later, his muscles torn and rebuilt, his bones crushed and reformed, Lorfel wished for nothing but blood. 1

Dark clouds covered the moonlit sky over the town of Relis. The steady fall of rain turned the ground into a sea of mud. Crashes of thunder echoed over the tree tops.

Jonse ran. A tree splintered and exploded behind him. Vibrations sent puddles of water into spasms. The crack of thunder shot new bolts of electricity through Jonse's nerves. He expected a huge claw to slash down on his shoulder any second. Jonse's legs pumped, narrowly avoiding the roots and stones that promised to send him to his death. His lungs were about to explode. He wished he had never come out here.

Each thudding of the beasts huge paws sounded closer and closer. Jonse didn't dare turn and look behind him. He had seen enough when he stumbled upon it as he tracked through the forest. He had seen just enough of the creature to know it was not any normal beast of these woods. He had seen enough to know it was nothing he ever wanted to see again.

Two hours ago Jonse had been safe in his warm, dry home. Safe, but not happy. He had argued with his father over his plans for the next few days. For months now, Jonse had planned a trip to Whalesong with his friends. They threw angry words at eachother for nearly an hour. In the end, Jonse slammed out of his home, his blood boiling. He needed to cool off and the woods outside of Ralis was just the place for that.

The rain didn't stop Jonse as he headed east into the woods. He dreamed of leaving the stables, leaving his family, and heading off on an adventure. He could go to the King's city and see the sites few of his village ever saw. When his mind returned to the present, he didn't recognize his surroundings. The rain fell harder. A knot tightened in Jonse's stomach. A cold sweat broke out on his brow. He climbed over a fallen tree and pushed through a large brush.

Then he saw it.

Gleaming red eyes almost ten feet off of the ground burned into him. A mouth opened showing huge white teeth dripping with streams of saliva that bent in the wind. A flash of lightning contrasted the beast against the night sky. It was huge. Jonse felt a deep rumble as the creature growled. He ran.

Air burst in and out of his mouth in furious gasps. His body wanted to collapse. He ran almost a mile before it hit him.

Jonse heard the sound of tearing cloth and felt himself pushed forward. He fell to his face in the mud but was back up in a second. His back was cold. His legs were numb. His left arm wouldn't move. Adrenaline and shock kept him from realizing that the beast had torn off almost all of the skin and half the muscle in his back. He ran twenty more yards before falling again. Mud filled the massive wound in his back. He was very cold. Jonse closed his eyes like a child, imagining that what he could not see could not hurt him. For a moment it seemed to work. He opened his eyes in time to see a flash of long white claws in an explosion of lighting. He saw nothing more. 2

Longhorn stood with his hands tucked into his loose leather belt. He looked through his open window and over the small town of Relis. Forty families, mostly farmers and tradesmen, lived in the village. A small dirt road cut across the town, separating the tavern, church, and stables from the blacksmith, general goods, and the sheriff's office. A series of farms surrounded the town in three layers of a circle, each with a small home and often a larger barn. Relis had supported the townsfolk for six generations and most, if not all, of the villagers loved the town.

Longhorn's office held only a large oak desk, chair, and a tall locked cabinet. Longhorn found it comfortable enough. A door in the back of the office led to a larger room with a bed, oven, three chairs and a table.

The sheriff sat in his large chair, tipped back on its rear legs, and put his feet up on his desk. He stretched his arms behind his back and clasped his hands behind his head. He took in a large breath, let it out slowly, and closed his eyes.

The wooden door burst open with a crash that almost sent Longhorn head first over the back of his tilting chair. It was Carson, the town's unofficial messenger. The boy was fifteen years old and took it as his personal mission to inform everyone in the town of every piece of gossip he knew. For most of the town folk, Carson was a great annoyance, resembling a mosquito buzzing close but never landing on a sleeping man's ear. Longhorn considered the boy a necessity for one reason: no one else seemed to want to talk to the new sheriff.

"The Fickleson boy is dead!"

Longhorn dragged his feet off of his desk and set his chair back onto all four legs before doing anything else. He believed in taking everything one step at a time. In this circumstance, not falling over backwards and cracking his skull open was more important than understanding Carson's shriek. All four posts firmly planted on the floor and his own boots flat on their soles, Longhorn took a moment to reorient himself with the boy's words.

"Who's dead?"

"The horseman, Fickleson. His boy, Jonse, is dead!" Carson still hadn't lowered his voice and Longhorn patted his hand down in the air and clenched his eyes shut. The boy understood and his next words were far more soothing to Longhorn's ears even if what he said was not.

"They found Jonse out in the woods. He ran off last night and they didn't find him until this morning. He's all cut up, Sheriff. They said his head was stuffed way down into his chest and his guts were all strung out in the trees!"

Longhorn felt a small burst of pride when the boy called him Sheriff, but the severity of the situation pushed it aside. Few others in the town, when they bothered to acknowledge him at all, called him Sheriff. Most didn't speak to him at all. They preferred his predecessor.

Longhorn moved here a year earlier when he heard the small village needed a new sheriff. The previous sheriff, a massive man known as Bron Greentree, had been a hero to the town. He apparently routed a gang of brigands who used the town for smuggling and slave-trading. Greentree had been sheriff for almost fifty years. Even if he had spent most of those fifty years drinking free ale at the town's only tavern and most likely skimming off of the taxes he collected for the King, Greentree was the town's hero.

One day Greentree fell over dead in his office. There was never any explanation but his massive size came with a massive appetite and many felt, though few ever spoke this out loud, that his heart simply could not keep up with his stomach. The town's hero had died and the town sent a message to the King's city with the news. Longhorn had been the response.

For twenty years Longhorn had served in the King's army. He fought in two wars and was promoted once in each war. He once led two hundred men against an equal number of southern barbarians and lost only six men. The Voth barbarians lost sixty. He served as commander of the watch for ten years. On his forty fifth birthday, Longhorn decided it was time to retire. When the message came that Relis needed a new sheriff, he jumped at the chance. Longhorn figured that keeping peace in a town of forty families was easier than leading an army against the hoards of the south.

Longhorn was right. Keeping the peace in Relis was easy. Surviving the sheer boredom was not. Every one of the few conversations Longhorn had with one of the townsfolk included mention of the previous sheriff. Everyone who entered his office gave him a critical look before a single word had yet passed. Every whisper he overheard as he walked down the town's single dirt road spoke Greentree just loud enough for him to hear. All Longhorn could hope was that they could not mourn the hero of Relis forever. There were more important things than vanity, however. Longhorn had a job to do.

"Where is the body?" Longhorn fixed his brown eyes on Carson. Carson stepped back, seeing a fire there few in the town had ever seen.

"Out north. On the trail to Ralthorp's farm about half a mile and then into the woods near the river." Longhorn strapped on his wide leather belt hanging the longsword he carried low on his left hip. He pulled his blue cloak off of the wall peg and wrapped it around his shoulders. Longhorn put his hand on the boy's shoulders.

"Show me." 3

Longhorn had seen death before. Longhorn had seen a hoard of two hundred men torn to shreds by musket fire. He had watched angry survivors of a battle stab wounded children on the battle field with bayonets. In all of his years, however, Longhorn had never seen anything like this before. As determined has he was to show his worth to the town, Longhorn knew this situation was over his head.

Carson had exaggerated in his description of the wounds, but not by much. The boy's head wasn't smashed down into his chest, but it was torn almost completely off and twisted a full turn around. His intestines weren't draped from the trees but about half of them were in a pile ten feet away and the rest of them were missing. His belly had been ripped open. His back was slashed down to the bone in four huge gashes. One of his legs was gone. Both of his arms were broken. In fifty years, Longhorn had never seen such a death. He could only hope the boy wasn't awake for most of it.

Two of the village's farmers were there. Lornhorn approached Rogard Greyfellow, a woodsman who lived next to the Ralthorp farm. He held a huge axe over one shoulder with his arm casually draped over its long

wooden handle. He gave Longhorn that same critical look the sheriff grew used to receiving and then looked back at the ruined boy.

"I've never seen anything like this." The large man scratched his thick black beard. "Some sort of beast got to him, I suppose. A wolf most likely. Greentree used to talk about the danger of the wolves in the deep woods." Longhorn let the statement slide but he knew it wasn't a wolf. No wolf had claws that could make a wound like the one in the boy's back. No wolf could break through the trees that hung like an archway leading to this spot. Longhorn just nodded his head. He wasn't sure what to do but agitating the townsfolk wasn't going to help. It was obvious from Rogard's tone that the woodsman didn't much believe his own theory.

Longhorn looked to the stamped path that led to this spot. It came from deeper into the woods. Trees, some large and alive, lay splintered to the side. Longhorn walked a little ways down this path and found one of the beast's paw prints. It was almost ten inches across. The claws had dug holes in the earth so deep that Longhorn's finger couldn't find the bottom. Longhorn's mind began reciting what he would tell the parents but beyond that he didn't know what to do next. >>>> 4

Speaking to the Fickleson family was easier than Longhorn expected. Longhorn had experience giving bad news to families who lost sons in war. Jonse's father had seen the boy before Longhorn had gotten there and that made it easier. Nothing Longhorn could say to Master Fickleson would be worse than finding his boy in that gruesome state. The boy's mother sat in a chair looking out of one of the small house's windows. Her face was gray.

"I am sorry for the loss of your boy, lady Fickleson." The woman's dead eyes met Longhorns. No tears fell down her cheeks. "I will do everything I can to catch and kill the beast responsible. You have my word." Longhorn remembered the huge paw print and the wounds on the boy's back and wasn't sure if he believed his own words. He bowed to them and left.

On his walk back to town Longhorn came to the only conclusion he could. He needed help. Longhorn didn't understand what was out there but he would not sit back and hope it went away. When he got back to the office he pulled a quill, an ink well, and a parchment out of his desk and began to write. When he finished the letter he stamped it with his crest and set it aside.

Each week riders from the King traveled to the villages to collect taxes and deliver news. The following morning the rider arrived and Longhorn gave him the note along with that week's tax collections.

Longhorn felt relief when he saw the letter on its way in the message pouch of the royal messenger riding back to the King's city. This relief left him when he saw the gathering outside of the town's tavern.

There were eight of them. Longhorn recognized them as hunters, woodsmen, and some of the larger farmers of the area. Longhorn hesitated before approaching them. Putting on his most casual look, Longhorn stepped over to the tavern.

"Good day, friends," All eight of the faces turned his way with grim expressions. They knew what he was going to say and they didn't want to hear it.

"Longhorn." Rogard Greyfellow was among them and tipped an imaginary hat towards him when he approached.

"It's a bit early for the evening's ale. What brings you all here? And why all of the equipment?" Longhorn nodded towards the axes, hammers, and picks that each one of the eight men held.

"One of our own is dead, Longhorn." Longhorn winced at the implication. OUR own, the speaker could have

said. Not yours. The rest of the group remained silent.

"Greyfellow, you saw what happened to the boy and I imagine one or two of you others have seen it too. I don't know what did that but I am going to find out. I have no doubt that it's very dangerous. I know you're probably not going to listen to me but I'm going to say it anyway. Don't go out there. Let me find out what I can. When I do I will let you know and let you help but right now we don't know what did that." It was the longest speech Longhorn had given to anyone since arriving in the village. The eight men at least seemed to consider his words but they looked to Greyfellow and the grizzly man just looked at the sheriff.

"We take care of our own, Longhorn. We'll find what did it and we'll bring it back on a spit." Longhorn looked into the eyes of each of the eight men and saw nothing but anger in their eyes. He watched as the group headed into the woods with packs on their backs and weapons on their belts. He hoped they found nothing. He hoped nothing found them. 5

Longhorn's hopes were met. For three days the hunters scoured the woods with no sign. Each day they left into the woods and each morning they returned empty handed. Longhorn continued to appeal to them but to no avail. Longhorn was watching them prepare for their forth night when he heard the squeeking wheels of a merchant's cart rolling up the road from the King's city.

Sitting next to the cart's driver was a small man dressed in brown robes. His hood was pulled low over his face and a large book lay open on his lap. The jerking of the cart's stop seemed to awaken him from what Longhorn could only assume was deep concentration or sleep. The robed fellow, a priest from the looks of him, spotted Longhorn. The priest handed a small package to the merchant, grabbed a large leather pack from behind his seat and stumbled down to the dirt road. He approached Longhorn without caution or self consciousness. He bowed deeply and almost lost the full contents of his large leather pack.

"Well met, sheriff. My name is Garity of the Dryphusorian Order. I'm here to help with your bear problem." Longhorn took a long look at the man. He was a small man, slight of build but one who moved with the graces of a dancer. He pulled back his hood and looked up at the gray skies. His head was smooth and shaved bald.

"I thank you, Garity, but I am not so sure it's a 'bear problem'." Longhorn smiled at the monk. He wasn't sure what response he expected from his message. One of the more senior commanders of the watch would come, perhaps. A half dozen of the King's professional hunters arriving would be more likely. Instead they sent him a priest. Longhorn tried his best to hide his disappointment.

"I was expecting someone else. Someone..."

"Bigger?"

Longhorn laughed. "I suppose so. Or at least more than one person. I don't really know whats out there but it tore apart a young boy. I expected the King to send some soldiers or hunters."

"If they sent a dozen or two dozen men and had them scour the lands every night for a month they would either return empty handed or dead. I don't know for sure what you have here, but if I am right, I can be more help to you than the King's guard. I spent my life studying these things. Let me help you out." Longhorn looked at the man's hard blue eyes.

"Alright." Longhorn held out his hand and Garity met it with a grip like a blacksmith. "That's quite a hand for a priest."

"Oh, I'm full of surprises." Garity gave Longhorn a grin. "I'd like to take a look at the place where the boy

died." "Aye," Longhorn said. "Let us find you a place to stay and we will travel out tomorrow morning."

Garity's sharp eyes turned to the tavern where that night's hunting party gathered and prepared to head out. "Tell me those men aren't heading out to hunt the beast."

"I'm afraid they are." Longhorn crossed his hands in front of his chest, expecting an accusation. Garity gave a single short burst of laughter.

"They're all going to die." 6

The village buried the boy two days earlier but the rest of the site had been left alone. Rain washed away the tracks but the trees lay where they fell. Garity, his brown robes dragging in the dirt, had thrown his hood back and was running his hand over his bald head. The more Longhorn talked to the monk, the more he liked him. For an officer of the court, Garity spoke clearly and directly. So often members of the court spoke volumes without saying a single truthful or useful statement. For a priest and monk he had a lot of wit. Garity covered his mouth with his hand and for the first time since the two had met, Longhorn saw something other than cheer and security in the small man's face.

"You said the tracks were about ten to twelve inches across?"

"Yes."

Garity went over to the one of the splintered trees and looked at four deep claw marks dug into it. He ran his finger in one of the claw marks, drawing it out to measure the depth. Without another word, Garity began walking down the trail.

They followed the broken trees for half a mile. Garity stopped at each one and examined any claw marks they found. The small man hunkered down in the mud not seeming to care that his brown robe had splashed into a rather large puddle. A smile crossed his face. He had found a track.

"You're right, it's big. Look at these first four claws. They're pretty typical for a bear, maybe a grizzly, but look at this back one. The paw isn't circular, it's long. There's a fifth claw over here." Garity took a small pick out of his leather satchel. It had a curved pointed blade and a two foot wooden handle. He dug carefully into the paw's print with the point of the blade.

"What does that mean?"

"It means this isn't just a bear." Garity held his own hand out to Longhorn, palm out, and wiggled his own thumb. He stood up and looked into the woods.

"I once heard a story of a man in a town to the north. He went out hunting one day and was bit by some huge rabid bear. He managed to kill the bear but the wound got infected. He crawled up into his hunting cabin a few miles from the town and no one heard from him for weeks. One day a party of the townsfolk went up there to see what had happened to him. They found him but he had changed. His bones had broken and shifted. Black fur covered his skin. When he saw them he roared and attacked. He killed three of the men before the other two filled him with arrows."

"You're saying we're dealing with a man who turned into a bear?" Longhorn looked at the monk as his question hung in the air. Longhorn felt like he wore another man's skin. Was he really out in the woods with a priest of the King talking about a man who turned into a bear? Garity shrugged.

"That's impossible, Garity." Longhorn shook his head.

"No." Garity pointed down the row of broken trees. "That's impossible.

"It's easy to recognize the strength of whatever chased down and ate the boy. We know it's big. We know it's strong. We know it has big claws. But what isn't being seen is how fast it was. That boy must have been running like the wind, but this thing chased him for half a mile and caught him. It chased him smashing down tree after tree. And think about these claw marks for a moment. Think really hard and imagine the bear chasing him down. What have we missed so far." Longhorn didn't like puzzles but he humored the priest. He looked down the rows of broken trees. He looked at the claw marks. He looked at the muddy path that broke down shrubs and underbrush. His eyes opened wide and he looked at Garity.

"It was running on two legs." 7

When they left the village, Hafol and the party of hunters felt good about themselves. Hafol, the blacksmith's assistant, was confident that they would find and kill whatever beast was in their woods. It had rained the first night but the next two were clear and warm. The moon brightened the shadows. The party kept watches at their camp half a mile from the original attacks location. They told jokes. They roasted a pig in a large fire, claiming it as bait but enjoying it thoroughly. Were it not for the murder they were here to avenge, the eight men would have enjoyed their time away from the nagging of their wives and the crying of their children.

On the fourth night rain fell from the sky at dusk and it fell harder as the night grew. No fire would take and Hafol sat shivering and quiet with his wet cloak pulled around him. Fatigue wrapped him like a cold wet blanket. Four nights he had spent out here and they had nothing at all to show for it.

Something cracked in the woods. A tree, thick from the sound of it, cracked and fell down. A surge of adrenaline flowed into Hafol's veins.

To their credit, as tired as they were, every one of the other men shot to their feet with weapons in hand. They were alert. They were prepared. Every one of them died in less than two minutes.

Rantho, the butcher of the town, was the first. A few seconds after the first tree fell, another cracked and fell on the outskirts of their camp. It smashed Rantho right in the back of the neck and the only sound louder than the crack of the tree was the crack of the butcher's spine. Jariko, Rantho's brother and owner of the Lone Tree ranch, died next when he ran to Rantho and a black shape blasted into his chest, crushing his sternum and sending four ribs into his lungs. The massive creature crashed into the camp like black fury. It roared.

Five of the remaining hunters fell to their knees under the beast's roar. Three of them dropped their weapons and placed their hands over their ears. Haron, one of the four farmers who joined the hunt, was praying when the beast's claw ripped off his face.

Only Greyfellow held his ground. Hafol stood hynotized as he saw the huge man standing in the camp with his legs wide and planted in the ground. Rain splashed unnoticed on his face. He pulled his heavy axe high into the air and rushed towards the massive black shape. He reached the beast just after it mauled and threw Yorin Jamison's corpse against a tree where it hung limp in the branches. Four huge slashes in Yorin's chest poured blood onto the ground.

Lightning flashed and Hafol got his first look at the sheer size of the beast. Greyfellow was the largest man in the village but this creature stood twice as tall and twice as wide. Grayfellow looked like a child in front of it. Hafol felt his bladder let go.

Greyfellow's cleaved his axe into the beast's leg. The large man's cry of victory was dwarfed by another of the beast's deafening roars. Greyfellow stood paralyzed by the roar. The beast twisted its head to one side and bit, crushing Greetree's skull in an explosion of blood and bone.

Hafol turned and fled. He ran hard in the opposite direction of the beast. A few seconds later he heard a scream and a few seconds after that he heard another. He didn't slow down. He might have regretted leaving his two remaining friends back at the blood bath that had been their jolly hunters' camp but right now he wanted to run to the opposite side of the world. His nerves fired again when he heard the crashing of trees close behind him. His lungs, unused to such trauma, felt like they were ripping apart. The crashing got closer. His heart threatened to explode in his chest and his legs were numb with pain. He tripped and fell into the mud. He got up on his hands and tried to run but fell face first again. He looked down. His leg was gone below the knee. His scream burst into a wet gurgle a few seconds later when four white claws buried themselves in his throat. The last of the hunters died in a puddle of mud and rain and blood. 8

The sight of the boy torn to shreds five days earlier had been the worst thing Longhorn had ever seen, until now. The sight of the boy was the scene of a single murder, this was the scene of a massacre.

He and Garity could make little sense of the carnage. It was as though the hunters had fallen into a sea of knives. It looked like twenty or thirty wolves had done this, not a single beast. Four hours of investigation revealed the same evidence they had found at the death of Jonse.

Garity stepped over to Longhorn and out of earshot of the rest of the townspeople who had come to the horrible scene. He stood silent next to the sheriff.

"I have no idea what to do." Under normal circumstances, Longhorn would not have been so open with someone he knew less than a week but these circumstances were far from normal.

Garity looked at him, his face somber.

"I don't have to tell you that this isn't your fault. You're smart enough to know that on your own."

"Do we even know that one beast did this? It could be two, or five, or ten." Longhorn felt himself beginning to panic.

"It's just one. The tracks, the paths, they show just one creature. It moves like five and it has the strength of twenty, but it's just one beast." Garity put his hand on Longhorn's shoulder. Longhorn looked over to the small group of farmers who dared to stomach the gruesome scene.

"I came here to protect these people and now nine of them are dead. Their blood is on my hands and I have to do something about it. Tomorrow the King's messenger will arrive. I am going to give him another letter and ask for a garrison of his guards. He may not send that many but even a few will help. We have to kill whatever is out here and we have to do it soon. This town is on the verge of disintegrating." Garity nodded his head.

"You're right. We may need those guards. We may need the King's hunters too." said Garity.

The two men made it back to town late in the afternoon. Every eye of the town followed the two men as they entered the tavern. 9

For one hundred and twenty years, the Leaning Oak Inn had served drinks, hot food, and shelter to travelers and villagers of Relis alike. It was the second largest establishment in the town next to the church. The tavern could serve half of the village in one sitting if needed.

Frendal was proud of his Inn. He, his wife Gloriana, and his two daughters kept the tavern running smoothly and they earned a good living from it. Gloriana did the cooking and his daughters served the tables and prepared the rooms. Travelers and guests of the town could rent one of four rooms upstairs for five silver a

night.

Late into the night, the stranger entered the Leaning Oak. A dark brown cloak covered in mud hung over his head and shoulders. Frendal had begun shuffling out the late night drinkers and wiping down one of the fifteen tables on the main floor when the cloaked man entered. The man was not big but still seemed to fill the frame of the door. Frendal couldn't see his deep hood. The man carried a large pack on his back. Leather straps held a massive bow next to the pack. The bow was four inches thick at the center, and almost as tall as the man who carried it. Frendal imagined it would take three men to string it.

"Good evening, friend. We were just closing up for the night." Frendal tried his best to keep his nervousness out of his voice, but something about the man scared him.

"I need a room." The voice of the stranger was gruff and scratchy, the sound of falling gravel. The stranger threw back his hood revealing the face of an old man, leathery from the sun with deep lines crossing his cheeks and brow. His thin hair hung down over his shoulders and he carried four days of beard on his wrinkled cheeks. He scanned the room with vacant gray eyes but when they locked onto Frendal, the barkeep turned away.

"You're in luck, friend. I have one room left." Frendal stepped around the bar, picked up old Jacke, a regular patron of the tavern, by the scruff of his jacket, and shoved him towards the door. The drunk stumbled out of the bar. "You must excuse me. We hardly see one visitor a week and now we have two in two days. I'm not used to travelers coming in the middle of the night."

"How much for the room?" The old man continued to look around the room paying no attention to the bartender's words.

"Five silver a night. My name's Frendal. What might your name be?" Frendal stuck his hand out towards the old man. The gray eyes locked on his again and it was all Frendal could do not to put his hand down and step away. The old man took it and shook it once so hard that the bartender felt his arm almost come out of its socket.

"Char."

The word hung heavy in the silent tavern.

"The room is down that hall and on the left. You can pay me in the morning." Frendal rubbed his shoulder and went back around the bar to finish up for the night. "It's lucky you got here when you did. It's not safe to travel tonight. People speak of a beast in the woods."

"I know. That's why I'm here." 10

"I was thirteen when my father and I went out in the woods to hunt down a wolf that had killed some of our cattle. My father loved the chance to go out in the woods, he was a hunter before he met my mother and he always missed it when he settled down." Garity sipped at his tea at one of the tables in the Leaning Oak. Longhorn picked at his afternoon meal with little appitite.

"We lost three cattle the night before and he wasn't about to lose any more. He had a musket. I don't know where he got it, this was right after the King had outlawed any firearms to anyone but the King's armies. We spent hours in the woods until the sun went down over the western mountains. The trees were like dead people staring down at us. The tracks got fresher and I could see how big they were but my father told me it was the way the wolf ran that made them look so big.

"And then there it is. It came out around a tree like hell itself. It wasn't a wolf, it was a dire wolf. It must have weighed as much as one of the cows it ate but it was lean. It looked at my father with those blazing red eyes and blood and spit coming out over its teeth. The teeth were as long as that steak knife you're holding.

"My father held up the musket. I don't think I could have been prouder of him. I was scared to death but there was my father facing this huge beast and holding up the musket. He pulled the trigger. Nothing. Not even a spark. I remember silence. The dire wolf looking at us. My father not believing that the musket didn't fire.

Garity started to laugh. "He threw it at him. He threw the whole musket at the wolf and it caught it in its mouth. The wolf twisted it like a pretzel and ate it.

"My father grabbed my hand and we ran. We ran for an hour and into the farm house. My mother jumped up in a panic, seeing the looks on our faces. 'what happend?' she said.

"'nothing. Let's go to bed' my father said back." Garitky kept laughing and Longhorn started laughing himself.

"What happened?"

"We didn't hear a thing for weeks. Our remaining cows were fine. We went out a few weeks later early in the morning and we found it." Garity started laughing again. "It died. It died eating the musket. Some part of the barrel or something didn't agree with it. My father wouldn't take any part of it back. He said it was the work of demons and best left for the Gods to bury. I remember looking down at the wolf's jaws. They were huge. I was hooked. I enrolled in the church and began the study of the beasts of legend."

Longhorn wiped away the tears in his eyes. He turned and saw Frendal scowling at him. He remembered the sight from the day before and any laughter fell. Frendal gave him a nod and gestured over to the old man in the corner eating a steak nearly as big as the man.

"That's Char, isn't it?"

"I don't know. I've never seen him, but the description fits. Let's go find out." Garity stood up and Longhorn followed. The two of them approached the table.

"Good morn, my friend. You wouldn't happen to be Char, would you?"

"I am." The old man didn't bother swallowing the piece of meat he had in his mouth.

"I am sheriff Longhorn."

"I know who ye are and I know what you want. There's a beast in your wood here; a beast that needs killing and I'm the one to do it." The old man turned his gray eyes on Longhorn.

"We'll go with you." The words burst out of Garity and Longhorn turned shocked. "You can't expect to hold a camp and hunt the beast with just yourself. It takes three good people to hunt down something like this. It doesn't run straight, it weaves."

"You know your beasts, don't you." A smile crept up one side of Char's deep and lined face. String this bow. With a smooth motion, Char slipped his huge bow from his pack and tossed it at Garity. The monk caught it in flight. He turned to Longhorn and shook his head with a sigh. The monk planted one foot on the ground, held the bow behind him, and bent forward while simultaneously drawing the loose bowstring up the shaft. The huge bow creaked and arched as the Monk's body moved. The string snapped into the groove at the top and held taught. He held the bow out to Char horizontally. Char took the bow without looking at it and grabbed

Garity's hands.

"These callouses are thick and your knuckles raw. How can a book wielding priest get hands like this?"

"I'm full of surprises."

Char looked hard and gave a single burst of laughter that caused Frendal to drop a glass on the bar with a thud.

"Alright. We leave at dusk. Go get ready." 11

Longhorn sat in his office with his soft leather boots up on his desk but stress tied his muscles together like a tight cord. His mind raced around the events of the last few days. Six days ago he worried about dying of boredom and now he would give anything to be back there.

This was his town. He accepted the order to protect it and protect it he would. Longhorn swung his feet around and stood up. He opened a cabinet on the room's wall and took out a cloth bundle. He placed the bundle on the desk with a heavy thud and unwrapped it.

When he returned from the southern battles, the King rewarded him personally. The Kingdom's best smith forged him the finest blade Longhorn had ever seen. Most of the royal court wore ceremonial swords, swords that looked nice but would most likely shatter if they hit anything hard. This blade was made for war. Carved grooves on the hardwood hilt kept its wielder's hand from slipping. A roaring lion of gold with ruby eyes decorated the base of the hilt. The King's sigil and four sapphires adorned the cross-guard. A pair of curved silver lines ran up the double-edge of the folded steel. Priests of the King had carved runes along the blade's center during a ceremony that lasted two days. The sword was priceless and deadly. The priests called it Shadowhewer. Longhorn hadn't taken it out since he arrived at the small town. There was little use for a blade like this in Relis, but every day it sat in the locked cabinet was a day it could not do what it had been made for.

Longhorn pulled the blade from its darkwood scabbard and held it to the light. The fire of the lantern reflected in the two tones of steel and silver along the blade. The ruby eyes of the lion burned with a desire to do battle or perhaps the desire for battle was Longhorn's. When he went out in those woods tonight, he could think of no finer weapon to carry with him. He took off his sheriff's blade and hung Shadowhewer low on his left hip. He buckled and tied his wide leather belt in the style he used for war.

Nervous energy filled Longhorn's heart but he knew this was what he must do. This was his town. He accepted its charge and he would protect it. He had expected to spend his days listening to arguments about oxen and his nights kicking drunks out of the local bar. He never expected to battle an unknown beast in the middle of the night, but it was his job and he would do it.

Longhorn placed his hands on his desk, his head dipping down. He closed his eyes and visions of previous battles flowed through him. Memories long buried crawled out of the gray fog of his past. He remembered leading a charge of forty men over a hill into nearly two hundred Voth barbarians. He remembered pinning a Voth axe-wielder under his steel boot and hammering a spear through the huge man's leather chestguard. He remembered the smell of sweat and gunpowder and blood soaking into the earth. Longhorn opened his eyes. He could no longer afford to be the retired military man now serving as sheriff of a small town. He had to be the hand of the King again, the sword of the Fiagon Empire.

Longhorn opened the door and stepped out into the town. 12

The three men walked in silence in the dusk of the coming night. Wind howled through the trees and dark

clouds marked the coming of another storm. Char wore his large pack and thick bow on his back. The old man seemed to know where he was going and the two other men followed his lead. By nightfall they reached their campsite, a place Char prepared earlier in the day. He went about setting up the small camp and then pulled a variety of strange metal devices out of his pack.

"Traps," he said, not looking up from his work. "They won't stop the beast but they'll let us know it's around." Garity and Longhorn exchanged looks.

"We're not going to hunt out its lair?" said Longhorn.

"This whole forest is its lair. On a fine soft night like this, it will come to us." With no further word, Char got up and went into the woods.

The old man returned to the camp a short time later. He continued his silence as he bent and strung his huge bow in the same technique Garity showed at the inn. He dug into the large pack and took out a quiver of long arrows. He drew one of these arrows out and inspected the barbed head. The head shined in the light of the small camp fire.

Garity broke the silence. "What are we facing here, Char?" Char continued his preparations, sticking the large arrow into the ground and pulling out another.

"The barbarians call it a Garthoulan. A twisted creature of half man and half beast. I've been tracking this one for seven weeks now. These beasts are strong, fast, and deadly. They hunt like you or I would. They have claws as long as knives and teeth like broken glass." Char finished his inspections and squatted down by the fire. His eyes shined yellow in the light of the fire.

"Do you have any advice?" asked Longhorn.

Char fixed his steel eyes on the town's sheriff a barbed arrow in his hand.

"Don't let it bite you."

Longhorn looked over at Garity. Char gave them a hard narrow stare and then broke out in deep laughter. The two men watched the old man for a moment and then exploded in laughter themselves. All three of them laughed into the darkness of the night. Garity reached out and slapped Char on the knot of one hard shoulder. Something dark on Char's bare arm caught Garity's attention.

"What's that on your arm, Char? A scar?"

Char didn't look down at the curving scar on his arm. It didn't look like single cut or tear, but a series of them.

"It used to be a tattoo before I cut it off. It used to say "Faigon Graywolves".

"You were one of the Greywolves?" Garity's eyes went wide. Longhorn looked over to Garity and shrugged.

"They were the King's regiment who went through the southern lines and killed the Voth King," Garity explained to the sheriff. "They cut off the head of the Voth armies and sent the rest of them into disarray."

"I never heard that," said Longhorn.

"You weren't meant to," said Char, his voice low and guttural. Char's eyes went narrow and hard again, looking through Longhorn and into the shadows of the past. "There were two hundred of us, trained and

armed from the best weaponmasters in the King's army. We didn't wear shining armor or carry banners. We looked like a bunch of refugees. We spent two years training for a single week.

"We slipped through the Voth lines individually or in pairs. Sometimes we snuck in with families orphaned in the outskirting villages. We met again outside of the Voth King's camp, about forty miles south of the front lines. He had a thousand men with him. Late at night we entered the camp and murdered the barbarian King as he slept. They killed Fifty of us when the camp awoke, and captured the other one hundred and fifty of us.

"They dragged us into the woods that night, speaking in their short and spitting language. They painted symbols on our chests in the blood of our friends, strange symbols from a lost religion worshiping bestial gods I never wanted to know about. They tied us to trees in fours, each at a compass point of the tree. Then they left. No guards, no fires, just darkness and silence in the forest.

"It rained that night, a lot like it's raining tonight. Thunder cracked in the woods. We heard screams from those tied to the furthest trees. They sounded like animals, pigs squealing as their bellies are torn open. Things roared in the darkness with lungs larger than any man. It went on all night. One by one they ate us. They took their time and enjoyed their meal.

"I was tied next to a friend of mine, Jenfen Willowwind from Danark. We whispered to each other in the dark trying not to go insane as our friends were ripped to shreds all around us, one by one. It went on all night long; the thunder cracking, the lightning showing us huge shapes moving through the trees, and the screaming and wailing of our friends.

"The next morning I looked over and Jenfen was looking at me with wide eyes. I looked down and something had bitten him in half below the waist.

"A forward regiment of the King's army broke through that morning and pushed back the Voth further south. They cut us free one by one but all I could think about was Jenfen's voice whispering to me in the dark.

"When we left Faigon and headed south we had two hundred men. They cut six of us from the trees that day. Faigon's Graywolves died in the woods. I cut off the tattoo and left my service with my dead friends." Char took a deep drink from the flask at his belt. "We killed the King, though, and started the end of the war." 13

It was three hours into the evening when the first of Char's traps sprung. A crack of metal on wood brought all three of the men to their feet. Longhorn drew his sword and even within the stress of the moment, Garity's eyes were drawn to the beautiful blade. Another crack broke through the night air. Then silence. All three men stood ready for anything. Char had one of his huge barbed arrows knocked in his massive bow. The three men heard another crack, this time far away.

"It's moving. Lets go." Char ran into the woods. Longhorn drew Shadowhewer from his belt and followed the hunter into the woods. He was fifty yards into the woods when he noticed that Garity hadn't followed. Longhorn heard a thick twang ahead and a curse in a tongue unknown to Longhorn. He came upon Char standing next to a gnarled tree with one of his arrows pierced through it, its tip protruding from the other side. He already had another arrow knocked and ready. He turned and looked at Longhorn.

"Where's the priest?" In reply both men heard another crack from behind them, near the camp. They ran towards it. Before they arrived they heard a tree crash to the ground. A roar broke open the night. Garity screamed. The two men crashed through the underbrush and into the camp. The fire had been stamped out and buried under a huge paw print. Garity's robe, torn and covered in blood lay in a heap. Char aimed his bow into the darkness, half drawn. The muscles on his arms and back, muscles of a man one third his age, strained against the resistance of the huge bow.

"He's gone." Longhorn's eyes went to the huge pool of blood. It held little doubt of Garity's fate. Garity might be running through the woods with his belly torn open and his heart pumping out its last blood by now. A tree creaked and splintered and a huge shadow fell upon them. Char drew and fired. Both men heard the thud of it sinking into meat and chipping off of bone. The beast roared again.

Longhorn once heard the roar of one hundred barbarians storming over a hill. What the barbarians lacked in battle tactics, they made up for in volume. The roar had the younger men of his army shaking like old women. He felt the fear of battle in his heart when he heard that roar but the barbarians' roar was nothing compared to the roar of the beast.

Longhorn felt nauseous. He wanted to fall to the ground and cover himself in mud. He wanted to run. Using every ounce of strength he had, he held his blade high and held his ground. Char seemed unaffected by the roar. Longhorn knew the old man had heard it before.

The beast was huge but they could see little of it in the darkness of the night. Only the beast's blazing red eyes shone like pinpoints of hellfire. Char drew and fired another barbed arrow and the arrow struck home. One of the beast's eyes burst into a shower of blood. The beast reared back and howled in anger and pain. It smashed one massive arm back and crushed a tree that got in the way.

Char had another arrow ready but the beast was too fast. It fell low to the ground its powerful legs curled under it like a spring. With a lunge, the beast swiped its claws past Char. Longhorn caught the glimpse of four shining claws and a trail of blood. Char's bowstring snapped and the bow fell to the ground. Char spun around and Longhorn saw how severe the wounds were. One cut tore open his belly. Another ripped the man's chest open exposing the white of his ribs. A third severed his throat. The fourth slashed both of the man's eyes. Blood sprayed from his moral wounds and the old hunter fell dead to the ground.

The forest was quiet. The cold of shock flowed over Longhorn. The sheriff's eyes went from the dead hunter to the beast in front of him. It rose on its legs and for the first time Longhorn got a full look at it.

It was nine feet tall and only its head resembled a bear. Its waist was thin and two huge legs held it up on oval paws tipped with gleaming claws. Its chest was wide, corded with muscle and thick hair. It held long arms out to its side each tipped with four claws and what looked like a thumb. Longhorn could feel the rumble of its breathing, deep and powerful. Its remaining eye blazed. Char's arrow protruded out of the socket of the other. It opened its mouth and bared its long fangs. Longhorn saw blood flowing from another wound along one of the huge creature's legs. The beast roared again.

It took every ounce of will to keep his sword from falling to the ground. The roar was so loud Longhorn could almost see the air rippling out from its mouth. Longhorn stepped back on his right foot and held his sword back, its shining point aiming towards the beast. The beast raised its left claw in preparation for a swipe that would tear the sheriff into pieces.

The claw whistled through the air as it swiped in at Longhorn. The sheriff ducked and felt the wind of the blow on the back of his neck. Longhorn sprung up and cut hard with Shadowhewer. Longhorn cleaved the blade into the beast's side, cutting through thick flesh down to the creature's ribs. The bear howled in pain and slashed again. One of the claws scratched a deep gash across Longhorn's chest. Longhorn gritted his teeth against the pain and struck again. This time the blade cut hard into the huge creature's arm. Black blood sprayed into the night air but the creature was far from finished. The strike put Longhorn off balance and a swipe of the back of the beast's wounded paw sent the Sheriff sliding through the dirt. It stood upright and roared raising its good paw to tear the life from Longhorn with every ounce of its weight.

A black shape fell from the tree behind the beast. Longhorn hardly recognized Garity. The priest had stripped his robes revealing a well muscled body filled with power and flexibility from years of hard training. In his

hand he held the pick Longhorn had seen him use at the site two days earlier but now he noticed the gleam of the pick's edge. It was a sickle of some sort. The wound on the beasts leg and the blood on the robe made sense now. It wasn't the priest's blood on the robe, it was the beast's.

In a dive as agile as an acrobat, Garity dove behind the beast and though he could not see it, Longhorn heard the tearing of the blade along the beast's back. The beast roared again in rage but before it could turn to face Garity the nimble priest had rolled through its legs and stood in front of it.

The priest stood with his legs apart and his knees bent. The beast slashed down with its deadly claws preparing to mash Garity into a pile of broken bone and torn flesh but the monk sidestepped at the last second and the claw found only empty dirt. Before it could recover the priest attacked.

Garity slashed down with the sickle tearing a diagonal line from the beast's shoulder down to its belly. The wound opened and blood poured out from the torn flesh and muscle.

But the beast was not finished. With its other claw it smashed forward and hit the monk solid. He shot through the air and smashed his back on a tree on the opposite side of his camp.

Longhorn saw what he needed to see. The beast was huge and deadly but it bled. It glared at Longhorn with its one blazing eye. It breathed in raspy and hollow breaths.

Longhorn raised his sword and gritted his teeth. Rain fell over his face and dripped from his hair. He felt the cold fury of Shadowhewer in his hand, the blade begging to bite again into the hideous beast. The massive creature roared one final time and the two rushed forward.

A mile away the people of the small town of Relis sat awake in their beds. Cries of pain and roars of fury broke through their dreams and left them shivering under their covers. A final cry shattered the night air and then all was quiet. Most found no sleep until the dawn. 14

Longhorn and Garity walked slowly to the waiting merchant cart that would take the priest back to the King's city.

"Well, I'm glad you could come give our town a visit, my friend. I hope you enjoyed your stay." Longhorn smiled a the priest. Garity laughed loud enough to turn the heads of nosy villagers.

"The food isn't bad, but the hunting wasn't quite what I expected. Still, this should raise a few eyebrows at the Order." Garity held up the five inch claw he wore around his neck on a leather cord. Garity gave Longhorn a long look and the sheriff knew they both thought about Char dying in the rain. "Take care, my friend."

"You too, Garity." Longhorn embraced the priest and saw him to the merchant cart. He waited until the cart had turned down the path and began the long journey back to civilization.

Longhorn walked back to his office, Shadowhewer hanging comfortably on his side from his wide leather belt. The blade became a legend in the town, the slayer of the Werebeast of Holstock Wood. Two older farmers passed Longhorn as he walked down the town's main road. They bowed.

"Good evening, Sheriff."

Longhorn bowed back. When the two passed, a smile crept onto his face. After one year serving the small village Longhorn could finally begin to enjoy his retirement.

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