

THE LYNDWOOD'S LIVING SONG

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Deep in the Lyndwood, the forest-folk sing an old pagan song. The words have been lost to time, but some *melody* remains. Amidst the great ferns and mist-clouds of the rainforest, it is known by the trees, the wolves, the rivers. Since your quest leads into those hexed woods, you should know of it. There is a tale to be told. A tale from when today's tall trees were saplings - A man learned to *listen* to the forest. It may serve you to do the same, but know that it was not without cost: He was driven half-mad, and forever changed.

The forest hides much. To this day, lost woodsmen are rarely found. When bright Sol passes away to the West, and the Moon's sorcerous light is cast over the realm, dreams awake. To brave the Lyndwood at nightfall is to risk the forest's enchantments. Our man was named Brunstan, born in the deep woods and raised far from any temple. He lived in the valehold of Old Hemdle. In those years, it was the Easternmost frontier of the kingdom, and many settlers were lost in its founding, though there are few graves. The town was built on an oxbow lake, a slow day's travel upriver from the Veitandian sea. Its first name was Hemlock Dale, for all the trees in that valley were of one kind – a pine bearing the smell of poisonous hemlock.

Brunstan and his wife, the priestess Tekla, would forage side-by-side amidst the evergreen hemlocks. Raised together in that frontier-hold, they knew each other's ways as well as the ways of the forest. Setting out at first light each day, they would hunt for small deer along the river, checking and laying traps for raccoons and rodents. The couple knew all the paths to berry-bushes and tuber-beds. They knew to avoid the upper river, where rain pools from the misty cliffs, and wyrms lay their eggs. Beyond Moonrise ridge, the forest is thicker, wilder. Dream-spirits dance through the trees, and a haze of confusion

fills the air. Brunstan and Tekla never passed Moonrise ridge, and only once - by valour and misfortune - braved the night.

This is the tall tale of that night among the singing trees. If you reach Old Hemdle, you may hear children sing its rhymes, wearing horned crowns and playing as wyrms and witches. Priests may call their games - and this story - sacreligious, deceptive. Yet, who can say what truth has survived the long years? I can only tell you the story I have heard, and hope it prepares you for your journey.

In the time of preparation before the holy day of Syzygy, a messenger came to Hemlock Dale. She had travelled from the Silver Citadel, and bore instruction on proper ritual from the high temples there. Hosted in the valehold's humble wooden temple, she spoke with the Greybeard about rites and blessings to be conducted. In those old days, there were tenscore villagers or so, and she had instructions for all. From a wooden step in the grassy town square, she gave daily teachings. Bonfires to be built, and seeing-scaffolds for better observations of the Guardian Stars. In the quiet hall of the temple, she taught the priestess Tekla new songs of worship to the Motherstar, and new understandings on the movement of bright Sol and Lhun. If you find yourself in Old Hemdle's small temple, you may still hear those songs today.

In the long conversations between this visitor and her hosts, there came a subject that angered the messenger. Raised voices were heard through the temple walls. Nearby townsfolk listened in, and watched with wide eyes as the messenger called the Greybeard and Tekla outside, to admonish them in view of the Stars.

The folk of Hemlock Dale had committed - in the messenger's words - a heresy. "Alike to the Kalant mountain-pagans!" she said, "a sin of false worship!" The townsfolk had gathered eagerly to watch the scene, and now shuffled their feet. The messenger continued, "No more shall ye leave offerings unburnt in the forest. The Stars do not eat the flesh of animals or fruit. Ye should know this, all of ye!

What separates man from beast?

What gifts gave Mother to her first priest?

What shows us right from wrong?

Stars are made of fire and song.

If ye be lucky, your... tributes... have been defiled by wolves. Alas..." she paused, and lingered in the town's silence, "I fear you have been giving unwitting tribute to dream-devils. Since I first crossed this forest's borders, I have heard their whispers. They feed your nightmares as a butcherman feeds pigs."

"Alas!" whispered Tekla, whose voice was thick. "On this morning's hunt, my husband and I brought the Moon's offering to Henge Hill."

"The Moon?" she hissed. "You blaspheme. Go back, and revoke your offering before Syzygy, lest the Motherstar tell wise Lhun of your shame."

Villagers were nearly shoulder-to-shoulder in the town square, a crowd of brown and grey heads, in cloaks and furs for the winter weather. Amidst the crowd, our man Brunstan stood with gritting teeth. He looked at his shadow. It fell eastward, for the morning was well-passed.

“Knowing the wolves, knowing the wyrms, knowing the dream-devils, you bid our priestess to brave the forest at dusk?” he said, moving to stand at his wife’s side. She took his hand.

“I have duties to the town,” said Tekla. “Fires must be blessed. Songs must be sung.”

“Will the light of courage not shine on you? On this village?” replied the messenger.

There was another silence. The hemlock trees beyond the town walls loomed tall. Beyond them, the mountains watched from grim, snowy faces, behind beards of grey cloud. Their forested arms encircled the small valehold. Standing alone on her wooden step, the messenger of the Silver Citadel frowned coldly.

Tekla squeezed her husband’s hand. “I will go to Henge Hill,” he sighed, “I will bring back the offering.”

Their home was a small wooden hut, with sausages and drying herbs hung from rough-cut rafters. Brunstan moved through it quickly, grabbing his pack, some food, a spear, grumbling aloud. “What separates man from beast?” he growled. “Stupidity, indeed.” All set, he threw a wolfskin over his shoulders, and in doing so, knocked a carved unicorn off the mantelpiece. He hissed in a breath and closed his eyes. Distantly, the villagefolk were chattering, and the late afternoon wind whistled through the valehold walls. Brunstan knelt down, picked up the unicorn, and slowly set it back in its place. He breathed, hunched forward over the mantle, and groaned. A scowl crossed his face. The wind whistled through the walls of the valehold.

Square-shouldered, Brunstan trudged through town, nodding and grunting replies to passer-by questions. "Brave man," one said to another. "To speak so, to a voice of the magi. Near-close to speaking against the throne, that is."

"No less brave to go against the forest each day," another said.

"Aye, so."

"Aye."

"Fool, perhaps."

"Aye, so."

At the gate - a boxy watchtower, built into the wall of bound trunks - he stopped and looked around. Friendly faces looked back from the street. "Sol guard ye, Brunny!" one called. He nodded. Beyond the wall, the river babbled. He paced back, and glanced up. Laden clouds slid South across the winter sky, but bright Sol was not yet below the treetops. Brunstan shifted the straps of his pack, sighing, looking around again. The dusty gate-track led to the town square, curving uphill past simple huts, gardens, and a goat-pen. Brunstan could just about see the temple door. He waited, clenching and unclenching his cold toes inside his boots. The forest creaked in the wind. At last, Tekla appeared. He held his spear high aloft, and pressed a hand to his chest. He saw only her. Walking out the temple into the open light of the square, she looked to the heavens, squinting, then down to her shadow and South to the gate. Brunstan smiled, and she met his far gaze, pressing a hand to her own chest. He felt his hand on his chest, imagined hers, blushed, bowed briefly, and turned to open the gate.

Beyond the walls of Old Hemdle, there are acres of well-worn woodland. Soft pine needle paths move through the rolling foothills of Mount Troutscale, to overlooks and springs. East of the lake are bare fields of tree-stumps and brambles. In Brunstan's days,

the villagefolk availed to plant fruit trees in these clearings, but the ground only gave root to hemlocks. Some curse, they presumed. If you'll allow an old mage some speculation, my understanding is that the foreign tree-seeds knew not the *song*, and could not beseech the ground for water. So, they withered. In those thorny groves, there was no birdsong, and little hunting. Brunstan passed them by quickly, and headed to the river ford, smiling from his wife's blessing. Cold, golden-brown water bubbled down the mountainside in streams and pools. Here, large stepping-stones (the maps say a bridge, today) led to the deep woods across the river. Wisps of fog shivered on each bank. In the forest depths, thin paths struggled into swaying clouds of fern fronds. The light of Sol is lost to a dense canopy, granting woodsmen a dim, green twilight. Soft earth underfoot swallows tracks and voices. Just off the path, the ground is washed with bright, wet, mosses. Any fallen branch is quickly overtaken and consumed by undergrowth. The grey-brown trunks of the hemlock trees are heavy with moist vines. Between the scales of their bark, the moss finds purchase and climbs the trees' sides. Lyndwood moss has a zealous thirst for rain and sun. Brunstan kicked growth from the edge of his path, and began the long walk to Henge Hill.

Aside from his muffled trudging and occasional birdcalls, the rainforest was silent to Brunstan. Using his spear as a walking-stick, he had been making good time. Wind moaned, and trees swept their branches together in response. As he walked, his mind turned to timberwolves, who made dens beneath the strong roots of the oldest trees. "They may be sheltering the coming rain, but wyrms... ay." He muttered to himself. "A day's walk in wolf-country, in winter. No deer and no rest. Fruitless wandering, fruitless effort, and a lecture from an outlander," he huffed, and booted a pinecone. "Who's to say what Stars eat, anyways? I reckon the old prophet-king didn't write that one down. There was spicewine in that offering! No Star'd say no to spicewine."

A loud branch snapped. Brunstan threw his back against a nearby tree and lowered his spear, scanning the woods. He had been far too loud. He stayed there, very still, for several minutes. Say, could it have been his own step that broke a branch? None lay broken on the path. The undergrowth swayed lazily. He couldn't see far into the bushes. He couldn't see much at all in the dim, filtered leaf-light. *'I'd hear a pack,'* he thought, *'but a lone wolf, maybe'*. Shivering, he stepped quietly back onto his path. Before long, it was raining.

Rainfall is said to be common and heavy in the Lyndwood. Sea-storms lash its southern coast, and northern winds pull snow and freezing rain from faraway glaciers across the Veitandian. Clouds catch amongst the cliffs. Half-frozen fog gathers in hollows. Running water seeks paths and always finds them. Brunstan's paths were no different, turned to shallow streams that soaked his boots. He began to switchback up the slopes of Henge Hill. As he climbed, he caught partial views between trees.

Long mountain-shadows swung over the forest. While there were some hours 'til dusk, his journey home would be in their shade. Beyond snowy peaks, Brunstan caught sight of an early Star. He thought of his resolve, in the cold. More resolute than most, but grimly so. *'We can grow in our virtues,'* he remembered his wife saying, *'ever-more virtuous, yet never reaching perfection. Our blessing and curse - to envision perfect virtue, to strive in its pursuit, and never to reach it. Flawless, bright, and ever-distant. There is a star for every ideal. Children of the light of Sol. They embody justice... peace... truth... courage...'* Brunstan found warmth in the memory of her voice, and offered no prayer to the Star.

Now, something to keep to yourself. The king may not acknowledge it, for he claims to conquer only wild lands - but before brave mankind came to those Western vales, they were indeed occupied. It was no timberwolf that piled the great dolmen-stones of Henge Hill. The first men to settle the Lyndwood must have spent many sleepless nights on watch for trolls and elves, and when they slept, they surely dreamed of them too. Out of fear, or perhaps reverence for the dream-spirits - most pagan, indeed - they began to leave tribute at the henge. The tree-tall boulders remain a mystery, arranged in a spiral as they are. A friend of mine, a mage of the Silver Citadel, once travelled to those stones to cast spells of query and revelation. Little more could he learn than I will tell you tonight - for little more is known beyond the story of brave Brunstan.

Brunstan found the offering untouched, at the centre of the spiral, where Tekla had sung songs of Syzygy. A loaf of gourd-bread, a fresh-caught trout, a pouchful of blackberries, and a skin of spicewine. A bird had pecked at the trout, but it was otherwise untouched. He frowned to think of why. Something about this place. His mind wandered to the coming twilight - *Where would he be when Sol's watch was over? And in the absence of his authority, who governs the unruly World? What mighty dream-devils then rise in the moonlight, unchecked, to play with the lost?* He grunted a curse on the foreign messenger.

Food repackaged, and spicewine warming his stomach, Brunstan waited for the rain to pause and climbed a sloping henge-stone. Leaping from this stone to that, he reached the tallest - a crossbeam over an arch. From atop the henge, atop the hill, Brunstan had a full view of Hemlock Dale, from the shores of the dark Veitandian Sea, to Moonrise Ridge. The shadows of the western crags were now cast on Mount Troutscale in the East. Under

the shadow, smoke rose from Brunstan's valehold. *'They'll be starting the bonfire,'* Brunstan thought, taking a swig of water. *'Mayhaps I'll be back in time for some music. I've made decent time.'* He shivered. In the wind, his sweaty undershirt had grown cold, and clung. *'Mayhaps I'll be back in time for dancing.'* Tired, cold, and lost in thought again, he nearly missed the noise in the bushes.

Something whined nearby. He lowered himself to the rock. His spear lay next to his pack, at the centre of the spiral. He couldn't leap down without making a sound, and startling the... *'Elk? It was not unlike an elk-bleat,'* he thought, closing his eyes and listening. *'Leftwards, and low. Too low to be a moose.'* Something small shuffled, struggling, but not moving. *'An injured calf?'* Trees creaked, and in his mind's eye, Brunstan saw *a trail of blood, left by a ragged, dragging leg. Blood-scent on the roots and moss, snaking through the trees like unspooling rope... and pulling on the rope... climbing, a wet nose, and fangs.* He blinked hard and rubbed his eyes. His thoughts confused him. It had been a long day, and this was an opportunity. Sliding down the wet side of his dolmen-stone, he dropped - as quietly as he could - to the mossy floor.

Crouching, listening, he snuck to his spear and crept out through the stones. The bushes growled. Brunstan frowned. Cheek to the moss of an outermost henge-stone, he peaked out. A creature huddled in the roots of a tree, shadowed and sheltered by ferns. It was small, about the size of a hare, or a fawn. *'That didn't growl,'* he thought, *'I am not this meal's only hunter,'* and he burst from his hiding place at thunder with a broad-chested bellow. Speartip low, knuckles white on the shaft, he charged the hidden wolf, and stumbled - for cowering in the bushes, broken prey at the end of a hunt, was a tiny woman.

Yes, hear me, a woman. Elderly, with bird's eyes in a weathered face. In pelts she was dressed, with garlands of feathers and leaves around her hunched shoulders. A forked crutch lay out of her short reach, and indeed one leg was gouged with fang-tears. Choking mid-bellow, Brunstan was most taken aback not by her size - which was child-like - but by her horns. Straight and grey, they were, like polished stone. They jutted straight up from her temples, and her coarse white hair twisted around them in matted braids. In the darkening daylight, they seemed... to *glow*. '*Wet nose, and fangs!*' cried the crone, and her mouth did not open.

The wolf leaped, snarling, between Brunstan and the horned witch. Teeth shone, bared towards his glinting spearhead - which wavered. Brown and grey was its coat, thick for the winter, and raised in anger. Its fangs leapt towards him. With a snap, they latched around one of Brunstan's gloved hands and sought to wrench the spear from his grip. He fell to the ground, but pulled his quarry with him. Twisting, Brunstan pressed for purchase on the spear - and its sharp tip found home in the wolf's side. He grunted, yet before he could drive his spear in, the wolf twisted off his glove, ripping open his hand. One hand remaining on the spear, he could not keep the wolf at bay.

It closed, snapping now for his neck, heavy paws driving the wind from Brunstan's chest. Gasping, flailing in the dirt, his injured hand swung blindly and found the creature's muzzle. He fought to push it away, but his hand was slick with blood. Bared fangs strained for his throat. Teeth champed into his palm. He cried out and - finding footing against a root - brought his weight from under the wolf to behind his spear-arm. The spearhead plunged heartward, the wolf whimpered, and Brunstan threw himself behind his weapon. They thrashed in the bushes until the wolf lay still. Breath ragged, blood running from his

torn hand, Brunstan rose to his feet. The woman under the tree held out her hands, and *flowers grew within them*. He stared at her, grimacing.

“Name yerself,” he said, “devil.”

Her hands were suddenly empty. She reached into her cloak of leaves, and produced a small bundle of wild berries. Her head bowed, she held them up towards Brunstan. ‘*A gift?*’ he thought.

Her lowered horns strobed with soft light. Brunstan’s head swam with fear and pain. ‘*An exchange,*’ he thought. *A bird sat atop his pack, at the centre of the henge. Inside, it smelled healing herbs and cloth.* Brunstan cursed under his breath, shoved his bleeding hand into an armpit, and held out the other. “Come, I have medicine.”

She frowned, threw the berries towards his outstretched hand, and pointed to her discarded stick. He passed it to her, and - rejecting any help - she made her way, with him, into the stones. There, Brunstan tended their wounds in silence. First hers, then his. Her leg was deeply bitten. She wasn’t going anywhere without his aid. Her blood was red, like his - and she had lost a lot of it. A lump formed in his throat, and while he was suspicious of this thing - . Yet aside from the most essential needs, she withdrew angrily from any further help or kindness. *Sounds* flit around her horns. *Birdsong* and *trees creaking* and *rainfall on soil*. They set Brunstan on edge. Each *sound* caused him to jump and glance her way, then to the cloud-hidden stars. In the West, the first teeth of the mountains were sliding into Sol.

Withdrawing and mustering her strength, the old woman leaned over her old staff and lowered her horns towards Brunstan. *Light, lilac and silver, pulsed from the earth, through her staff, to the tips of her horns, and back.* He leapt back, afraid. “Cast no spells

upon me, witch!" and he saw a singing mouth, open, with home inside. It sang a long, wavering note, and the choir echoed it. He saw the carollers in the streets, and the listening dreamers. The song was warm upon his skin, like sunlight. He could taste it and felt his back hit mossy stone, and saw, again, the haggard woman. She was looking at him now, quizzically, then pointed Westwards. Sol was low, and Brunstan's head ached. "Listen," he barked. "There'll be none of that. We haven't the time. I can get you safe and warm, over there." He pointed East, towards the firesmoke of Hemdle.

"Harrgh," she rattled from her small mouth. "Ragharat." Each word came painfully, and quiet.

Brunstan paced, shaking his head and clenching his hurt hand. *'She may be a devil but she is no dream-devil. She bleeds. More, she's near dead, or will be soon. I can't leave her here,'* he thought, *'I can't stay here myself, either. There are... homes beneath each tree, and warm songs within. In the mountains is a hearth, or an altar...*

*I have helped this wose,
now this wose must too help me.*

So sing the root-laws:

Reciprocity.'

He stopped cold. Those were not his thoughts. The woman's horns were lowered again, *glimmering*. Fear shook his heart, and he backed away from her, thinking of *'running, or fetching his spear to defend himself ... yet a harm dealt was a harm owed, he knew. As know all who are bound - bound to the soil, and the root-law, under everlasting twilight...'* He stumbled over a rock, fell, and crawled backwards. The pain of his injured hand centred him, and he saw the witch standing amidst the old stones, hunched, staff *shining*. If only he could kick it away from her. *The pain in his hand vanished*. His heart raced. "I'm trying to help you, woman!" he shouted, "whatever ye be, ye're injured."

“Ash nahk” she muttered, and waved a hand. Brunstan felt drunk, or poisoned, and in the air around the woman there appeared... *images. A snake-tunnel in the rock, in the hidden cliffs. A path of roots that led there. The cold of nightfall. The warmth of Song.*

‘*What manner of snake can tunnel through rock?*’ he thought, and received no answer, for the woman collapsed.

He carried her, his pack, and his spear to the edge of the woods. He knew his track back, and he knew he’d not cross the river before nightfall. Twilight was setting in. Tekla would be thinking of him. He considered camping here, on the hill, and gulped. ‘*What snakes does this witch foretell?*’ he thought, ‘*the kind that nests in the Wyrmpool, and hunts the river at night.*’ Wolves, too, would be waking. Dusk and dawn, when animals are ungoverned by Sol, and enticed by Lhun. To the West, where the purpling sky was still bright, black cliffs loomed amongst the nightfog - close.

Brunstan stood a while at the wood’s edge, haste and sense muddled by the recent events. Perhaps he was half-dreaming. Perhaps, indeed, this is the story of a lunatic lost in the forest - Though there is truth to’t, and something to be learned. When the half-dream Brunstan *listened*, he could *hear ... a quiet tune* amongst the trees, and recognised it. The *carol-song of the trees, calling him to safety. To the warm home, nearby.* Yes, Brunstan heard a way through the trees, and turned away from Hemdle’s track. What Star shone upon this decision? Was it kindness, or curiosity? Is there a Star whose light is adventure, and if it shines upon you, should you follow it? Or was our man misled? Darkness, fear, and the trickery of dream-devils. Who can say? Brunstan took the song-path.

The lowest branches of hemlock pines are waist-high. Stooping to *listen closer*, Brunstan saw a hole in the dense undergrowth, following the roots of the tree to another,

and from there, to another. A well-travelled rabbit-path, he would think, were it not for his new companion. Putting his pack between himself and the branches, he shouldered his way onto the track and *voices heralded his coming. They called to him from ahead, saying 'To one who gives much, much is given. To feed the fey, is to be fore-fed.'* The wind moaned, the branches groaned in its movement, and Brunstan *heard*

*'Moss o'erturned by scraping scales,
Stems uprooted by grasping claws,
Within the teeth, a child wails,
'Remember rot,' reminds the laws.'*

He stopped. Pushing along the track was noisy, but it was not the only noise. Ahead, somewhere, was the rustle of a large creature. Something crawled, or slithered, on this very path, ahead. On his shoulder, under his wolfskin, the old woman shook awake. 'Arrak!' she said, and crawled weakly up his shoulder, and onto an overhead branch. The approaching rustle became a thrash, and Brunstan followed the woman into the tree, heaving up on his good hand. The pine needles closed beneath him, leaving him alone on a branch with the *wose. She was a woodwose. A man that listens is a man that knows.* The woodwose was swaying dazily, eyes closed, brow creased, horns *flickering* in Brunstan's direction. 'Sarkh-gah,' she said, and lifted a braid to reveal the base of a horn. Her skin was scarred there. She twisted her clawed finger to point at Brunstan's forehead. *He saw an acorn, long-buried in dry soil. It would never root until... The music of rain... and a crack. The cracking of a nut-shell, reverberating in his throbbing head. Weak roots expanding, reaching, reaching to find... a network. A song with many singers, a single melody, a shared... dream, a twilit... kingdom...* Brunstan vomited and fell from the tree. His vision was blurry, his forehead pounded, and the ferns parted to reveal a great frilled snake-head.

Green as Lyndwood moss is a wyrm, and each scale is the image of a curled leaf. They are no myth. Certainly not to the slayers I've met. Have ye slain a wyrm in your travels? Beside the orb, on the mantle, ye may see a scale for yourself. Rust-brown it is now, with age - and the oldest scales are golden. Jewelers will pay a pretty penny for a wyrmscale, so keep your eyes open in the Lyndwood - but your ears open wider. Listen for slithering, and swaying trees - Lest you find yourself, as Brunstan did, beneath their fangs.

For fangs it had indeed, as long as a forearm. And great eyes, with zigzag pupils. Behind its head was an array of crystal horns, akin to those of the woodwose. Its opening mouth filled the path tunnel, scaled lips curling back to reveal rows of hooked teeth. Half-swallowed, half-chewed, a deer twitched inside the pink mouth. Brunstan scrambled out of its way, but it turned after him. A black, forked tongue darted in his direction and tasted the air. Two curled forelegs dragged its long body closer. Brunstan's head reeled, and he pushed himself deeper into the undergrowth, until his back hit a trunk. He had only ever seen wyrms at a distance, through leaf-cover, or underwater, or at dusk. He shivered at the smell of its hot, bloodied mouth; at the scraping drag of its slow, heavy body. Through the pine needles, he saw its amorphous eye focusing upon him. A taloned hand parted the bushes, and he saw *light. Its crown of horns alit with a rising-and-falling technicolour glow. Purple and red, sparkled the wyrm - and above Brunstan, a reply came in yellow and green. Blue, danced the wyrmight. Blue, sang the woodwose.* Brunstan struggled to focus his eyes on the colour, and couldn't. Instead, he could *taste it, and taste the colour of his own fear spinning away from him. Blue-green, sung the wose-woman*, and the wyrm's claws pushed away. Its thick body slowly slithered past, side-to-side. Along its back rose and fell a short, spiny frill, like a fish's, leading to a forked tailtip - the last glance Brunstan had of the wyrm. It whipped off, into the dusk, and he vomited again.

Sick of body and spirit, Brunstan nearly broke apart. He was numb, cold, and dizzy. Stress had turned his gut to a tight, twitching fist. Ailing and exhausted, the wose and the woodsman traveled on. In the trail of the wurm, the path was clearer, and they could walk easier, supported by spear and staff. Night fell. Brunstan found himself more afraid than he expected, vulnerable, following new paths. He looked over his shoulder often, but thought most of where he placed his feet. The wose was often frustrated with him, but did not light or lower her horns again. Instead, she held his hand and led him, like a child, through the dark - which did not seem to affect her. The route was easygoing, contouring hills, and staying under thick treecover.

Let us note, again, that our man is exhausted, deranged, and without light. I note this for his tale speaks of ancient ruins in the deep woods. Great stone barrows, laid by the henge-builders. They have never been found. His tale tells of chambers in the foothills of the fog-cliffs, with root-pillar walls, and mossy floors. Long-abandoned, they were. Like the dolmens of Henge Hill, silent and overgrown. Perhaps you'll be the one to find them, buried by the long years, under the green Lyndwood floor.

Brunstan was led through these ruins to a true cave. The woodwose lived in no hole, but a grand cavern, accessed through a wide crack in the hillside. Trees continued uphill beyond it, and heavy ferns half-concealed it. Starlight, hidden by the hemlocks, was truly lost inside. Brunstan stood at its entrance for several minutes, and searched the canopy for a Star. Any Star, any true light in the grey-black crisscrossed needles. He strained to remember a verse, but could only think of Tekla. His heart ached, he closed his eyes, and stood this way for a further minute.

When he opened them, light had been conjured inside. A small fire. He ducked low, and moved within. The walls were glassy, once-melted, and danced with flame-shadows. Some ways inside, underground, the wose-home was revealed to Brunstan. Tall, dripping stalagmites fell from a smoke-hidden ceiling. Dried moss and fungal mats were laid over the floor. Baskets and furs hung from rope, tied between rocks. Brunstan saw that the wose, like him, collected small wooden carvings. Some goats, wolves and a small wose family, with a half-dozen tiny woodwose children. Here and there, crystal veins in the walls caught - and held - the firelight.

The old woman attempted to busy herself slowly, and not without pain - for she was dragging her leg. She struggled to fetch a jug of water, and Brunstan helped her. Within the fire, she set a stone bowl, and Brunstant filled it from the jug. The water was aromatic, ginger-scented. Wose-herbology is a mystery, a magecraft untranslated into the tongues of men, like the far-sight of Dreki shamans. If you learn something, in your travels, write it down. Through healing steam, Brunstan warmed himself next to the fire, and tended it. Through the flames, he saw the far side of the cavern. It sloped away, steeper and steeper, into a dark pit. Smoke billowed from within. He frowned, and yes - the ceiling-clouds of smoke could not be accounted for by the small campfire. They came from within. His nose wrinkled, as he tried to make out what burned under the mountain. A bassy grumble, more a vibration than a sound, disturbed the smoke. Brunstan felt it in the stone, in his chest. After a moment of silence, he noticed that the wose was frozen, standing beside the fire, and looking - with him - at the smoking pit.

“Khor-dath,” she rasped.

Over spicy root-tea, the pair cleaned and mended their wounds. There was a natural basin, a pond, of collected rainwater inside. She was less resistant to his help now, and he thought of *reciprocity*. He wondered who owed who, after the wyrm encounter, and figured she knew quite well. Without request, she opened his pack and took out some of the offering-bundle. Finding the spicewine empty, she paused. *'She must be accustomed to the offerings,'* Brunstan thought. Her horns *flashed*. *'And unaccustomed to stealing from that which has already been given'*. With a hard scowl, she discarded the wineskin and tucked into some trout. Around her horns, the air *glimmered* as she ate, and she turned them away from Brunstan. Indeed, *looking* at the *colour* made his head throb - and past where she sat, in the darkness, when he *focused*, he could see, no, hear... *a song. Colours, rippling from the smoke-tunnel in melodic waves. Rippling away from a source, a potent white spike of colour folded upon colour folded upon...* He shook his head, and the woodwose put a small hand on his arm as if to steady him.

"Nagh sgaka," she rasped, shaking her head. "Khordath nagh sgaka"

"I need to sleep," he said. "Are we safe?" He mimed sleeping, and she climbed to her feet and limped away.

The woodwose vanished into the smoke. He squinted to see where she went, then, with effort and concentration, *squinted*. *Colours blossomed in the darkness, lighting the space. She was deep in a tunnel, and her horns shone like silver blades. Wind heaved, like forge-bellows, through hidden chimneys and cracks. The wose moved towards a stark shape in the darkness - a dazzling cathedral-spire. Wind whipped around it, and Brunstan saw that it was made of the light, of the song... layered together, as a blacksmith layers sheets of steel into a single blade. 'Welcome,' the Worldsong seemed to say. 'Welcome,' said the strong wind over the sea. 'Welcome,' said the mountains, breathing in the wind. 'Welcome,' sang a knife-sharp voice from the spire.* He sighed, and

lay back on the mossy floor. The pain in his forehead came in waves, now. Waves, like the sighing wind. Waves, like the *colour-melody* from under the mountain. “Am I losing my mind?” he said aloud, and he thought *‘I am safe here. I am welcome.’*

He woke with a gasp, and sucked in a cold breath. A deerskin had been thrown over him, even tucked in. In the coals, slow-burning treebark smoked. He could taste it, sweet and heady. It wasn't anything he recognised, but it was pleasant. He saw the woodwose sleeping in a hammock, slung between two stalagmites. *‘Syzygy!’* he thought, and rolled to his feet. His hand throbbed in its dressings. Throwing the blanket around him, and pulling a torch from the fire, he walked to the cave mouth. It was quiet outside, and dry. The moss crunched underfoot, frosty, and Brunstan went for a walk, seeking the stars. *‘What a fool I’ve been,’* he thought. *‘Curiosity kills cats, but at least they die sane. How hexed am I? That visitor’ll want to exorcise me when I get back. Prob’ly a safe idea, too.’* He sighed, and thought more of his wife. It had been some time since he'd spent a night without her, and he was restless. He walked further up the hill, in the dark, careful not to lose his way. Ahead, pale limestone shone in moonlight. A cliffside, a crag. Smiling, looking up, he saw a gap in the trees.

Stars twinkle, I'm sure you know. On a dark night, all the clearer. The beauty of Celestia is a thing that captures the mind. Each shimmering star whispers to be watched, to be known; and they hold you - As the hands of a lover. It is in those moments that priests fall to spiritual ecstasy. Brunstan sat in silence, and *listened*. His grumbling thoughts, which had simmered all night, were still as a millpond. Fear had given way to resignation. Here he was, sitting on a rock, at the mercy of the World. *A melody moved through the*

trees. His breathing followed its rhythm, as it always had. He knew the words, but felt no call to sing them. His mind was elsewhere. His eyes were on the crescent of Lhun, approaching the peak of Her arc through the sky. Her crystal form glowed peach-red, for it was near winter's end. Inner facets glimmered pink, and cloudy blue. In the East, the Motherstar waited, high above the Holy City. Brunstan waited too.

Have you been to Seawash at Syzygy-tide? It is quite the experience. The alchemists build incandescent pyres, and they spark afire when moonlight falls upon them. "See our fire, oh Mother of mankind!" chant the acolytes "How high does it burn, oh everconstant light?" they cry, with arms thrown high. "How bright, how hot?" Round and round, they circle the bonfires. "Hear us sing, oh voice of Celestia!" they weep. "How true are our words, oh all-knowing one? How pure, how valourous?" Above the gathered thousands, fireworks burst and flare. Breasts heaving with worship, the priests petition their Star: "Tell the Moon of our fire, of our song! Tell Her of our glory, our valour! Tell Her we are worthy!" Tongues of flame carry the plea, and the shining sides of the Silver Citadel mirror them - stretching, distorted, to the reach of its high towertop. There, atop the pinnacle of our tallest temple, you may see the small silhouettes of the magi, long-robed, bearing their crystal staves aloft. What message do they see in the starlight? What reply?

Brunstan sat on his rock, head empty, eyes wide. The Moon rose towards Her zenith above the mountaintops. Stars slid behind Her, save one: The Motherstar shone, proud, between the World and the Moon. Converging, aligning, the three reached syzygy. Brunstan watched as the holy Star found the centre of the crescent. *'Oh, Mother, oh Moon,'* he prayed, *'There is so much I do not understand... I have been brave, and it has led me to fear. What is this woodwose? What do the Stars say? Must I help this poor creature, or*

run from her?' Starlight caught on the inner prisms of Lhun, and for a minute, She was full. 'Watch over my wife, I ask, and may Sol guide me home.'

He opened his mind to the Stars, to the Moon, and they vanished behind glowing lilac leaves. The sky was covered by the branches - ever-branching, ever-dividing, a fractal - of immense silver trees. One rose up directly behind him, the size of a cathedral. Its roots, which streamed past him into the forest, were as thick as rivers. They shone. Within the forest, the roots burst into light. The singing streets he had heard, he now saw: A spiderweb, or a city - A noble court of trees and woodland dreams. His eye could not land on any building, but he imagined kingly estates and mage-towers... And inside them, spirits. All conjoined, all rooted... Yet in their song, they moved. Motes of light, like moths and butterflies, fluttered around on musical winds. Above Mount Troutscale, another great silver tree rose, holding up the sky - a sky of silver branches, and purple twilight everlasting. On the Western horizon, towards the heart of the Lyndwood, he saw dozens more - a great shield, held by many arms, between the forests and the skies.

Brunstan arose, finding himself light-footed. He ran in fear, but his legs moved in a dance, skipping like a child. The light, pulsing from the trees... it was a rhythm, he realised. Thrum, thrum, skip, skip. As his heartbeat joined the World's, his fear turned to wonder. Wonder was a current in the river where he swam, pulling him towards something. He could not help but follow it, back to the cave-mouth, laughing.

The woodwose was awake, at the edge of her cave. On her back hung orange wings, and she was lithe and strong. Long antennae sprouted from her hair, like a

mantis'. No crone, but some fairy-thing. Brunstan giggled, and realised that his own form had... changed. With blurred eyes, he looked at his feet, and they pulsed with light. Where he stepped, the light left footsteps... traces. Each step had produced rings, ripples like in pond-water, that pulsed through the moss to join a chorus of movement. He moved his hand, and watched the same trace left in the air, ringing out. He laughed. He felt... unbound, and wondered how he looked, how he was... perceived by the woodwose - or by those who watched without eyes. Thinking of the great mountains, watching from grey faces, he was suddenly afeared, and every hair on his body stood upright. 'Hail, wosewoman.' he said with an unintended bow. 'Where are we?'

Cut into his grave, atop Henge Hill, we find these words:

*'The World sings in water-flow,
And trees to the World in growth.
The song is sung by all below,
Who swear the root-law oath.*

*Songs began as simple things.
Touching, moving, melodies.
But through eons' imaginings,
They bloom'd into complexities.*

*Ev'ry plant is dreaming,
And all the beasts asleep.
Within the song convening,
In twilit courts of peace.'*

They were not her words. Nor were they words, though he heard them as words. Colour and scent swirled around Brunstan, and within them were ideas. Tuneful ideas, yes, and welcoming. Welcoming him to a place that he could half-see, half-hear, half-feel. A wave of heady nausea rolled through him, and the world blurred... but it passed, and his vision of dreamland crystalised.

Through streets and fox-paths wandered the dream-spirits. Upright deer, spriggans, and unicorns. They danced together between memories and fancies - ephemeral halls and glades that grew like bubbles, and burst upon waking. Rising above these were mighty dreams. The silver trees. Inside were cathedrals and courts, conjured by those that never woke: Deep dreamers, older than mankind, older than ferns and grasses... Within these spaces lived dream-spirits that had no waking form. Dreaming dreams, native to the twilight kingdom. So as his mind gave words to the song, it gave forms to these spirits - Tall and elegant, ageless, resplendent. So as a peacock is to a rooster, the elves are to men. Amongst the trees he saw them, and drew back in fear.

'Wose-witch,' whispered Brunstan. 'Wake me. I do not belong here. I have a home, and a wife.'

She showed him Tekla, as a moving weight upon the moss, and a scent in the twitching nose of a sleeping shrew. She was out there, in the forest, searching.

'Oh, wake me,' he pleaded. 'You... it... something... told me about a law - reciprocity - I took you from the jaws of a wolf. Wake me up. I do not want to be here.'

The woodwose stood up - about to Brunstan's knee - and her face was downcast. She pointed to within the cave. Something dwelled there. Something old, and alien. A memory blossomed in the smoke. Falling. White fire, and melting rock. A bright scar

across the sky and a wound in the mountainside. A silver tree, burning, and a song so loud it lifted roots from the earth...

'Stop this! Devilry!' roared Brunstan. He threw himself to the ground and covered his eyes.

Alas, you cannot close your eyes to a vision.

Dead silence, and liquid rock cooling to glass. Isolation, and in isolation, dreaming. The thing in the darkness, in the cave... it learned to sing. Then came new growth, reconciliation. A great debt, repaid over centuries. A place within the Worldsong - As an honoured guest of the court. To this guest came offerings, in the small voices of the woodwoses. Every offering begot favour. Reciprocity. Love, in mutual service, so as trees love soil.

The woodwose bowed before Brunstan, and he shook on the ground. Eventually, his fear cooled, and he sat up against a rock.

'Ye're old, and ye cannot serve yer... god... much longer,' he said, grave.

She showed him a cave full of woses. They were in turmoil, and one held aloft a great axe. Bigger than a wose. A man-axe. She showed him a pilgrimage, and many goodbyes. Then, herself, sitting alone in the cave, singing to the voice under the mountain.

'And yer the last,' said Brunstan. He rubbed his face, and sighed. 'The last of a heathen breed. Singing into our dreams... Worshippin' something unholy... The visitor'll be happy. Oh, what's to be done? I saved ye from the wolf, and ye saved me from the wyrm... Ye're loyal, and I trust ye... but what's to be done? You've shown me so much, and I needn't ask why. I drank the spicewine left for ye... Ye lonely thing, ye endling.'

The woodwose bowed still.

'Don't suppose an apology's reciprocal, so I won't offer ye one. I'll say...' he groaned. 'I'll say yer not the last to sing yer song. If you'll teach me.'

Rising, the woodwose started to sing, and it was not her song. It was the cave-creature, and every tree, and the mountains, and all the dreamers of that vale - Yes, even the visitor in Hemlock Dale, though she tossed and turned. The woodwose taught Brunstan the Worldsong, and he fell into a deep dream, where time stretched - and she sang to him for years, until he could sing in turn. He dreamed of all things, connected. Living spirits, and spirits-long passed - whose melodies are sung by the living, and thus endure... in dreams. So much had been lost, and only-half remembered by the World. In time, her voice grew fainter, and he saw her dance away, into the twilit kingdom.

Brunstan was found in the early dawn hours, by brave Tekla the priestess. He was singing in the woods, quite mad, and from his bleeding temples there sprouted two small horns. He collapsed into her arms, weeping and muttering of roots and blessings. He was, as expected, exorcised by the visiting priestess, whose account made its way back to the Silver Citadel - and in time, to me. Rift-wars in the East prevented further investigation, in his lifetime, and his horned skull was buried. I've looked into the town of Old Hemdle, but messengers and orb-pondering can only reveal so much. I do hope you will learn more.

Though Brunstan searched, he never again found the woodwove's cave. Even today, we only know of the stones on Henge Hill. No wose-home or magic horn has ever turned up. Then again, mayhaps Brunstan was a lunatic - a madman who spent his days singing like a tree - but I doubt it. His story aligns very well with the teachings of oneiromancers, and elf-speakers. It has, however, been condemned by the priests of Sol and Lhun - and by rose-knights, ay, by the crown. They damn the thing that lies beneath the shrouded cliffs of

Hemlock Dale. A fallen Star, or something else - from beyond the Stars - from the outer darkness... Something unaccounted-for in the holy texts.

I pray the Guardian Stars watch over you in your travels, but I fear they hold no purview over the twilight kingdom. I'll light a fire for your safety, and good fortune on your quest. Past Moonrise Ridge, the forest remains untouched, and ferns grow large as houses. Houses, perhaps, of wose-witches. The trees in the deep Lyndwoods groan, and sing - most certainly - in the wind. Perchance, they dream. If you listen too long at twilight, perchance you will too.

Be it wove-luck, or the gifts of a pagan god, Brunstan lived well, had many children, and became the Greybeard of Old Hemdle. Though years have passed, he is remembered well. He was known to sing to his many children at night, and to the town when drinking, and to himself in old age. His song endures, here and there. Refrains made their way into hymns for Sol, and rhythms to work-songs. The folk of the valehold have all forgotten, but beneath the mountain, maybe something is still *listening*.

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