

Dark Heart of the Woods

A Tale of Dunes & Dusk

"I'm a businessman, through-and-through. You see, the trick of it is, everything has a price. Everything and *everyone*." His voice carried in the still air. "Hells, I'd sell my sister for the right price."

He looked back in the wagon at the target of his blather, a woman. She was tall, broad-shouldered, and was dressed in simple robes. The expression she wore, however, was withering.

"Heh. That's a joke. I don't have a sister."

She turned away, and from his angle, his eyes caught the glint of something around her neck. The collar of her robes concealed it, normally, but as she moved he saw it. Gold. He turned back around and snapped at the reins of the beast pulling them, which grunted in protest. Had she noticed?

"So, how far is it to the abbey again?"

His passenger's only reply was a sigh.

The pair traveled for another few hours in silence before the duskwinds began to stir. Janos pulled on the camel until it stopped, and surveyed the land before them. He grew nervous. The road, if one could call it that, led on through an otherwise trackless expanse of wasteland. Here and there a stone outcropping broke the flat plane of horizon, and off in the distance he fancied that he saw his destination. They were very exposed.

"We'll give Grace an hour of rest and then be moving again," he said, hoping to wheedle favor with feigned beneficence toward the beast. His passenger nodded in agreement and hopped out of the shoddy wagon to stretch her legs for a moment.

"Gods be good, we shouldn't have too long of a road yet," she said, as he visibly struggled with the camel's harness. She did not offer any assistance. He was a short man, past his prime, and had never been athletic.

"Damn it, Hetta, would you give me a hand with this stupid animal?"

She walked over, calmed Grace, and untwisted the leather straps. She towered over him, and her imperious gaze stoked the rage that he kept in his heart. He muttered thanks and walked off the trail to take a piss, more as an excuse to get away from her than anything. He feared her, he realized. There was something about the way she stood, the words she used, that commanded respect. She had, allegedly, walked by herself all the way to Queensfield when he intercepted her course and lied about being a Guildsman. He was nervous enough as it was, traveling just the pair of them. But, then again, he was a coward. When he finished and returned to the stolen wagon, Hetta pointed in the direction they were traveling.

"Janos, travelers on the road." It was too late to try and hide, so he ensured the bone dagger he carried was prominently displayed on his hip. Fears of hostility, however, were assuaged when the travelers revealed themselves to be wandering traders themselves. There were three in total: two men and a woman. It appeared that two of them were a married couple, the actual traders, and the third their son, by appearances.

“Lo!” the male trader called out in a friendly manner. Janos knew enough about the Guildsman to impersonate one well enough, and exchanged roadside pleasantries to affirm no ill-intent. They had just come from the abbey that Janos and Hetta were heading toward.

“Queer place,” the woman said. Her teeth were stained purple, and she cradled a clay jug in her lap. “But a good spot to rest. There’s a fellow from the east staying, if you plan to visit.”

Hetta explained her affiliation, and they thanked her on behalf of the abbey’s hospitality. With pleasantries exchanged, the two groups continued on in opposite directions.

“Was that the abbey’s wine she drank?”

“Yes. The brewmaster will give all the details, but that was indeed ours.” Janos grunted in reply. He’d like to have a cup or two of that when they arrived.

The rest of the trip went by smoothly, if unremarkable. The hours dragged on and on until, in the distance, Janos saw spindly vertical shapes.

“Trees ahead. We must be getting close.” When they passed the first tree he stopped the cart and examined it. He’d heard stories about trees, but had never seen one with his own eyes. “Strange, innit? Doesn’t look like what I imagined trees to look like.” The flora in question was short and squat, with a trunk that slowly tapered and curved. It had vertical ribs running the full length, and its crown was a knobby fist of tightly-packed folds. The whole of it was a dusky red color that transitioned to a purple in the recesses. He touched the trunk and immediately regretted it, pulling back and looking at his hand. “Why the hells is it wet?”

“They’re harmless. You’ll see lots of them. We’re close, let’s keep moving.”

The cart ambled its way further along the path, the strange trees growing in frequency and size. Before long the path grew treacherously dark, as what little light was normally available became obscured by the forest. Their camel grunted and refused to move any further.

“We can’t bloody see where we’re going, Hetta! I didn’t sign up to drive through darkness!”

“You only need a light for the last, or beginning, stretch of the woods.” She got out of the wagon and, after making calming noises to Grace, led the beast forward. Janos sat in the front of the wagon, sweating profusely, straining to listen for sounds in the dark woods. There was a closeness to the air, a hush; he didn’t care for the feeling at all. The strange trees seemed to shift in his vision. He was about to complain when he saw a dim light ahead.

“Is that the abbey?” he groaned. Hetta confirmed, and continued to lead them toward it. The light was a faint magenta color, and although it grew brighter as they moved, Janos struggled to identify where it originated. His question was forgotten, though, as the abbey came into view. It was a large structure, made of stone, and it looked old. Ancient, even. Nothing in Queensfield was constructed in this way, and cast in the purple glow, it *loomed*.

“Welcome to Midnight Abbey,” Hetta said. “We’re home.” She led Janos to the stables to board the camel, where he noted three other animals in the monastery’s care. They then approached the front doors of the structure. Matching his earlier observation, the doors were made of ancient wood and metal. Hetta rapped the entry with a large knocker, the sound thundering out into the quiet. Slowly the doors opened, and a robed man introduced himself.

“Ah, sister Hetta! Welcome back! You were missed.” The two embraced. “And you must be a future business partner! My name is Brother Aimon. Please, come in.”

“Brother Aimon, would you be so kind as to settle Janos in? I am weary from the road, and would like to retire to my quarters for a time.” Aimon bowed in agreement, but pulled her aside. They held a brief whispered conversation. “Janos, we will discuss our business tomorrow with Master Harlow and the others. Please enjoy your stay in the meantime.” The tall woman turned and walked down the hallway to the right of the foyer, turned left, and disappeared.

“You must be weary, too. Let me show you to your room for the evening. Please, this way.”

Janos nervously assented, and followed the friar down the hallway to the left. The architecture of the monastery was practical, and the monks had made obvious attempts to make the cold stone feel welcoming. Janos was led to a guest room with simple furnishings, but Janos was struck with the lavishness when compared to Queensfield and other cities in southern Rhu.

“Thank you for your generosity, Brother Aimon,” he said, examining his lodging. Misapprehension warred against greed; the abbey appeared to do well for itself.

“Of course, of course. We’ll have a hot meal delivered to your room soon, as well as your belongings.”

The monk bowed his way out, shutting the door. Janos walked to a basin filled with water and mopped his face. Another monk brought in his belongings, and a third knocked on his door and delivered a meal. Like the furnishings, the dinner was simple. A bowl of hot vegetable stew and a strange, dense bread. He couldn’t place either, but both were delicious and welcome after trail rations.

He sat on the bed, a nameless anxiety pressing in on his spirit despite the refreshments.

“I want some of that wine,” he decided, standing again. He opened his door and peered out. No one wandered the hall. “I’m sure they have some in the kitchen.” He walked into the foyer and then into a large dining hall. A man sat alone at one of the tables. One look at him told Janos two things: he wasn’t a monk at the abbey, and he was drunk.

“Friend, share your wine?” Janos asked, sidling up to the man. “I believe you’re from east of here?” The drunken man was barely coherent, and sputtered half a reply before staring blankly at Janos.

“Ah, I think you’ve had a little too much.” He coaxed the jug of wine away and gave it a sniff. It didn’t smell like anything he’d drank before, but at the moment, he wasn’t too picky.

“Issss so damn loud,” the drunk mumbled. “Haff ta find it. Ba bum! Ba bum!” He was hitting the table with his fist now, and Janos backed away, absconding with his prize. He closed the door to his room quietly, and sat on the bed once again.

“If I’m going to pretend to be a wine merchant, I’d better get used to my product,” he mused. The liquid appeared black, but he knew it was a deep purple in truth. It had an earthy

aroma, and the taste was mildly sweet. Altogether a very drinkable wine, he thought to himself.

With nothing better to do, he nursed the jug and eventually drifted off to sleep.

He was far below the earth. He knew this, instinctively, as one does when they dream. It was a vast cavernous space, and he knew this, too, despite the blackness. He let his senses extend out, questing for something, anything, to anchor himself within the void. As if to answer, there was a reverberation. He felt it and heard it: a violent pulse. A second followed, and a third. The cavern throbbed, and with this new rhythm came light. He stood before it in awe. Some part of him understood the color he was seeing wasn't anything he could describe, but his brain kept trying to put a name to it. It was purple, but it wasn't. The glow bathed the space in this unknowable color and gave the cavern form. It was a labyrinth of lattice, a thousand thousand shapes connecting to one another, and at the center, was it. The Heart.

Janos awoke with a start. Someone was knocking. Disoriented, he opened the door.

"Master Janos, I hope you rested well. Master Harlow awaits you in the dining hall, and has asked that you join him in breaking of fast."

The nameless monk was polite, but gave him a strange look. Janos grunted and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. What had he dreamed? He couldn't remember. Disheveled and annoyed, he followed the monk to a large hall. At its center was a long table. Hetta and another man, presumably Harlow, were seated.

"Greetings, Janos of Queensfield. I apologize for waking you. I am Harlow, Brewmaster of this abbey. Please, please, come sit." Janos acquiesced. There was an array of simple, but delicious, food spread before the three of them. He began to help himself, piling what appeared to be grilled mushrooms onto his plate.

"Pleasure meeting you, Brewmaster," Janos said. He looked to his traveling companion and nodded. "Hetta."

His traveling companion narrowed her eyes, but Harlow spoke kindly.

"Hetta has given me the details of her trip back. Let's dive right into business, shall we? As you know, she traveled to Queensfield looking for a guildsman to act as a distributor for the abbey. We are able to produce enough Midnight Wine that we'd like to start supplying local towns. You would be responsible for transporting and selling the wine; just one town to start, and then more as we are able to scale." Janos nodded along.

"The logistics and sales are your purview. The abbey will simply produce a quantity up front. You sell it, and bring back the agreed upon cost, pocketing the rest. We'll even give you some at no charge, in the beginning, to use as incentives."

As if on cue, Hetta produced a tablet with figures, passing it to Janos. He was barely literate, and didn't know the first thing about selling wine, but he was clever enough to play along. How hard could it be?

"What's the catch?"

Both Hetta and the brewmaster looked to one another. “There isn’t one,” Harlow replied, “but, we are looking for long-term partners. Someone who is invested in the abbey. Someone who will join the collective. Oh, and, I suppose one other thing. You shouldn’t drink what you’re selling.” There was a pause. “Bad for business.” They both stared at Janos, who suddenly grew very self-conscious.

“Janos the Great, purveyor of Midnight Wine, accepts.” Hetta’s disdain was barely masked.

“Then we have an accord. Welcome to the family, Janos. Hetta will see to the finer details and transcribe the necessary contracts. We should have our first shipment ready in a day or two. In the meantime, please feel free to enjoy the abbey. Hetta will explain the grounds, as well.” The brewmaster stood. “I have many pressing matters to attend to, so regrettably, I must excuse myself.” The frail man bowed and walked to the east, leaving the two to finish their meal.

“Oh, Janos, one last thing,” Harlow called from across the room. “Please heed Hetta’s instructions on the abbey guest areas. We don’t want you wandering into any of the brewing rooms, for example.” He bowed again and disappeared.

“The west wing, where you stayed, is the guest wing. You may see other guests from time to time. You may freely roam there, and here in the great hall. Please stay out of the eastern wing.”

“That’s where you brew?”

“Yes.” She paused. “Meals are served twice daily in the hall; the kitchens are just back there. You are free to explore the grounds outside, but please do not wander far.” She stood up from the bench and gave a slight bow. “I’m sure we’ll speak again soon. If you’ll excuse me.”

Janos returned to his room, scrubbed the purple stains from his teeth and lips, and decided to explore a little. There were a dozen or so guest suites, mostly with doors shut. Curious to the state of the drunken man from yesterday, he quietly tested each of the doors. One by one they opened to reveal an empty and clean room. A door opened to his right and a female monk emerged carrying a large sack. They startled each other. She apologized and offered a short bow.

“I was looking for the man who was in the great hall yesterday when I arrived; the man from the east. Do you know which room he’s in?” The woman gave him a strained look.

“I’m sorry, he left before you woke today. You’re the only guest at the abbey right now.”

Disappointed, Janos thanked her. He was hoping to pass time talking with the traveler, but now, he would have to find something else to idle away the hours. She closed the door behind her, and as she did, he peered inside. Clean and tidy.

“Well, I suppose I can explore the grounds a bit.” He moved through the dining hall, into the foyer, and heaved against the abbey’s main portal. The omnipresent glow and gloom was suffocating, and he nearly went back inside, but curiosity got the better of him. Where was that dim light coming from?

He wandered around to where Grace was stabled and checked on her; unnecessary, as the monks had taken good care of her. There were two mules and another camel keeping her company, none of which looked as if they belonged here. Something about the animals nagged at him, but he shrugged it off and continued around the side of the structure.

All around the glow persisted, and at last, he realized with wonder, that it came from the trees themselves. The largest ones seemed to give off a faint phosphorescence that alone would hardly be noticeable, but here, where they grew thick, it provided just enough ambient light to navigate. The smell here was rich and earthy.

He rounded the corner into the abbey's back yards. Pavestones formed a small outdoor gathering area. An old, circular well peeked up over a wall further away.

"Oh, hello." The voice startled Janos, who yelped and shrunk back. A monk was sitting in a chair on the patio, obviously taking a break of some kind. "Apologies, I didn't mean to startle you."

Janos rubbed his slick palms together. "Gods damn it, that's twice now. I've been on edge since I stepped foot into these woods."

The monk laughed. "They are rather gloomy, aren't they? Ah, it's you, the visitor from last night with Hetta. I'm Aimon. Care to sit?"

Janos, having nothing better to do, assented, taking an open seat next to Aimon. "I was just exploring the grounds. I have time to kill before the shipment is ready."

"Yes, I believe the last batch is being bottled today," the monk replied, almost wistfully. "It's a remarkable drink, is it not?" Janos, not wishing to offend, agreed. It was, he supposed, better than the swill he'd had in Queensfield. "The taste is fine, mind you, but the remarkable bit is how it's made. Look around us. There's no light here. No crops or orchards or apiaries." Aimon's eyes twinkled. "Would you like to know our secret?"

Janos faltered. To his relief the monk laughed. "I forget not everyone is as invested in horticulture as I."

"Go on," the trader said, annoyed. His emotions were frayed. Undeterred, the monk dove into his explanation.

"How to grow crops without light? It's the age-old question, and we here at the abbey arrived at our own answer. The Reaches, you see, were once a forest of trees. They are no longer. The trees you see here, now, are the fruiting bodies of a particular fungus. Many plants can grow in the dark, and this area has provided us with an abundance to study. We've landed on a handful of cultivars that keep the abbey nearly self-sufficient." Aimon pointed at the well. "And, of course, we're lucky to have a source of water. Our forebears were wise indeed to have restored this place."

"Restored?"

"Yes, we didn't build this structure. It was abandoned ruins when they found it. There are still some not far from here, but you'd do well to stay close to the abbey proper."

Janos' face wrinkled. "Midnight Wine is mushroom wine?"

“Wine isn’t the correct term. It’s more of a...nectar, really. But the flesh is edible as well, and certain varieties can be dehydrated and used as fuel.” He leaned in conspiratorially. “We’re even trying to create a viable form of lumber, but haven’t quite solved that yet.”

“If they don’t need light, what makes them grow?”

“That,” the friar replied, “is a trade secret, I’m afraid. But, probably not for long. I have a feeling you’ll embrace it all and join us. There’s good money to be made, sure, but what we’re doing is bigger than that.”

A scream, faint but distinct, turned his blood to ice, and he stood, ready to flee. He looked at Aimon who remained unphased.

“Varg,” he said, pointing out into the woods. “Nasty howls they have. It’s why we caution against wandering out too far from the abbey. They’ve never come close enough to pose a danger, but we exercise prudence.”

“That came from inside the abbey,” Janos said, still standing.

“I assure you, Janos, there are no varg in the abbey. Come, I’ll head inside with you and we can ask the others, and have ourselves a drink.” Reluctantly, he followed Aimon back inside. The foyer and great hall were empty, but in the kitchens the two monks were still hard at work. They either didn’t hear anything, or like Aimon, had grown accustomed to it. Aimon helped himself to a clay bottle of mushroom wine, and poured them both a mug. Janos hesitated.

“It’ll help with the nerves. Why don’t you go lay down? I’ll make sure you don’t miss dinner.” Nerves frayed, he agreed, and let Aimon escort him to his guest room. There wasn’t a lock on his door, and so he moved a heavy trunk in front of the door instead.

“This place...I’m losing it. To hells with it,” he muttered, sitting down on the edge of the bed. The entire journey had felt wrong, somehow. Every interaction seemed to compound the sense of dread that clung to this place like spider silk. Anger blunted the raw fear; he was angry at himself for being a coward, angry at this cursed abbey, angry at Hetta for her contempt.

“To hells with it,” he repeated. He could wait for the shipment of wine, sell it, and never return, but the idea of staying another night here caused the fear and anxiety to surge back up. Then he remembered the necklace. He was sure he had seen it, and if Hetta wore gold under her robes, it stands to reason the other monks may, too. He could fill his pack with whatever he could steal and leave within the hour. Yes, he liked this idea much better. A gold necklace would be worth as much as the shipment of wine, anyway.

Janos paced around his room. If he got caught he’d feign ignorance, or even say he was looking for Hetta. Yes! That was it, his alibi. He was looking for Hetta to discuss some finer details of their business arrangement. He stuffed the clothes back into his pack and slung it over his shoulder. He looked around the room for anything that might be of value, but nothing stood out to him beyond taking the blanket from the bed, which he decided not to do.

A little liquid courage was needed for the next step, so he drained the cup Aimon had poured for him and poked his head out of the door.

The hallway and dining hall were empty. He crept back toward the kitchens and saw two monks busy preparing what he assumed would be dinner. They didn't notice as he stole a loaf of the strange bread, stuffing it in the pack beside his clothes. He scanned the dining hall in the same way, and opted to take a sconce off the wall. It was burning some lump of fuel. Perhaps this was what Aimon had referred to earlier? He tucked his pack in a shadowy corner by the main entrance, so as to not look suspicious if he were caught. Anything of value from here on out would have to fit onto his person.

The eastern hallway was empty, and he crept along the corridor trying to figure out his next move. He had no idea if the doors were locked, but could make a guess if they were occupied by looking through the cracks for light. Unlike the western wing, there were only a handful of doors to check. He tried the first handle, and like the others, it had no lock. Judging by the lack of light, he cracked it open. Sweat beaded on his forehead. It wasn't a room, as he expected, but rather a stone alcove with steps circling downward. The thought of descending made him recall the dream from the previous night, and he felt ill. He backed out to try the next door.

Instead, he heard the next door open. Fear gripped him, and he slid, as quietly as he could, down a few steps. The door to the stairway opened, and Janos panicked. He was only a breath or two in front of whoever had just walked in, and he had to *move*. Whether they heard his steps was a secondary concern, but he bounded as lightly as his frame would allow. The stairs terminated into a hallway that connected to a large room, like a shadow of the dining hall above. The floor here was dirt, and the walls felt like unfinished stone. Phosphorescent blooms bathed the room in that sordid purple light. Against the far back wall from the stairs were a set of three pillars, but the mushroom light wasn't bright enough for him to make out much more than that. He extinguished the sconce and hid behind a clump of nearby fungi.

His pursuer entered the cellar a moment later. They held no light of their own, but navigated in the shadows as if they had done this a thousand times before. In their arms they carried something, but he didn't know what. With bated breath he watched as they passed right by him, walking toward the wall with the pillars. He waited, trying to understand what they were doing. There were sparks and then an orange light flared into existence. One by one the monk lit sconces on the wall and pillars; he was afraid they'd continue around the whole room, but they stopped, satisfied at some unknown criteria.

The fire-light revealed what the fungus-light kept hidden. Against each of the three pillars, arranged upside down, were the pallid forms of men and women. Janos' heart began skipping beats and he clutched at his chest. His breaths came in short, shallow bursts and he felt his eyes bugging out. His brain was screaming for him to run, but his body was frozen in place. The monk was doing something with one of the corpses, but his brain wasn't capable of processing that information.

After a few seconds his body began to respond. Keeping his eyes on the monk, he crept out of his hiding place and slithered toward the stairwell. The monk did something, and there was the sound like rain on clay. As if in response he felt a vile susurrations there in the cellar. Whether he saw the swaying of the fungus and the magenta light pulse faintly or imagined it didn't matter. He was on the threshold of the stairs when Hetta's eyes locked with his from across the room.

A scream built up inside Janos, and he didn't know whether it came out or not. He didn't know if he was visible or not. Hetta didn't pause the grisly work, but her eyes bored

holes into his. He slid sideways up onto the first steps, their eyes transfixed on one another until the stone of the wall severed the connection. He bounded up the steps three at a time, scrabbling his way in the darkness. He rushed out of the eastern wing, grabbed his pack, and threw open the abbey's doors.

The stables were dark, but he knew which animal was Grace, and fumbled to harness her. He didn't know where the wagon was, either, and so attempted to mount the camel directly. The animals were making a racket now. Grace grunted and bit at him, sending him sprawling to the dirt.

His head connected with the stable wall and he let out a pathetic whimper.

Janos didn't know how long he laid there in a pile, blood running from his head. Brother Aimon appeared at some point and led him back inside, fussing and bandaging. The world felt muffled, and he didn't fight it as the monk coaxed him into bed. He fell into a dreamless sleep.

"Ah, you're awake. I was beginning to become worried," Aimon said from where he sat on his bed. Janos simply stared at the man, unable to parse reality from fiction. He hit his head, that much was for sure, but everything up to that point felt like a dream.

"You had too much to drink earlier, and for some reason tried to mount that camel of yours. In the dark no less. Took a hit to the head, but if you're awake now I think you'll recover. Rest a while. The first batch of Midnight Wine is ready; we'll load up your wagon and get you on your way as soon as you're able." He promised to check back in a while and excused himself, leaving Janos to his scattered thoughts.

At last, a cool branch of logic drowned out the rest. If he was in danger, there was ample opportunity for danger to have happened. When he awoke again he felt fine. His head hurt some, sure, but he stood and stretched. Aimon was in the dining hall and greeted him.

"I'm glad to see you on your feet. I don't know what possessed you to do such a thing, but a man's affairs are his own. I know you're ready to leave; your wagon has been prepared."

Janos climbed into the seat of his wagon, which was now heavily laden with jugs of wine, listening as Aimon instructed him on how to exit the woods the way he came.

"Oh, one last thing," the monk said as he moved away from Grace and back toward the abbey. The wagon shook, as if someone had clambered aboard.

"Hetta has asked to travel with you back to Queensfield."