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opening extract from

Ghost Hunter: Book 6 Chronicles of Ancient Darkness

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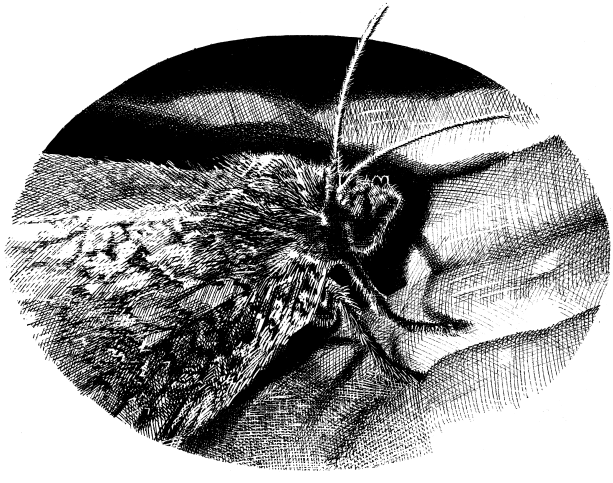
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ONE



Torak doesn't want to enter the silent camp.

The fire is dead. Fin-Kedinn's axe lies in the ashes. Renn's bow has been trodden into the mud. The only trace of Wolf is a scatter of paw-prints.

Axe, bow and prints are dusted with what looks like dirty snow. As Torak draws closer, grey moths rise in a swarm. Grimacing, he flicks them away. But as he moves off, they settle again to feed.

At the shelter, he halts. The doorpost feels sticky. He catches that sweet, cloying smell. He dare not go in.

It's dark in there, but he glimpses a heaving mass of grey moths – and beneath it, three still forms. His mind rejects what he sees, but his heart already knows.

He backs away. He falls. Darkness closes over him . . .

With a gasp, Torak sat up.

He was in the shelter, huddled in his sleeping-sack. His heart hammered against his ribs. His jaws ached from grinding his teeth. He had not been asleep. His muscles were taut with the strain of constant vigilance. But he had seen those bodies. It was as if Eostra had reached into his mind and twisted his thoughts.

It's what she wants you to see, he told himself. It isn't true. Here is Fin-Kedinn, asleep in the shelter. And Wolf and Darkfur and the cubs are safe at the resting place. And Renn is safe with the Boar Clan. *It isn't true*.

Something crawled along his collarbone. He crushed it with his fist. The grey moth left a powdery smear and a taint of rottenness.

At the back of the shelter, another moth settled on Fin-Kedinn's parted lips.

Torak kicked off his sleeping-sack and crawled to his foster father. The moth rose, circled, and flitted out into the night.

Fin-Kedinn moaned in his sleep. Already, nightmares were seeping into his dreams. But Torak knew not to wake him. If he did, the evil images would haunt the Raven Leader for days.

Torak's own vision clung to him like the moths' unclean dust. Pulling on leggings, jerkin and boots, he left the shelter.

The Blackthorn Moon cast long blue shadows across the clearing. Around it, the breath of the Forest floated among the pines.

A few dogs raised their heads as Torak passed, but the camp was quiet. You had to know the Raven Clan as well as he did to perceive how wrong things were. The shelters clustered like frightened aurochs about the long-fire which burned through the night. Saeunn had ringed the clearing

with smoking juniper brands mounted on stakes, in an attempt to ward off the moths.

In the fork of a birch tree, Rip and Rek roosted with their heads tucked under their wings. They slept peacefully. So far, the grey moths had only blighted people.

Ignoring the ravens' gurgling protests, Torak gathered them up and went to sit by the long-fire, his arms full of drowsy, feathered warmth.

In the Forest, a stag roared.

When he was little, Torak loved hearing the red deer bellow on misty autumn nights. Snuggled in his sleeping-sack, he would gaze into the embers and imagine he saw tiny, fiery stags clashing antlers in fiery valleys. He'd felt safe, knowing that Fa would keep the dark and the demons away.

He knew better now. Three autumns ago, on a night such as this, he had crouched in the wreck of a shelter, and watched his father bleed his life away.

The stag fell silent. Trees creaked and groaned in their sleep. Torak wished someone would wake up.

He longed for Wolf; but howling for him would disturb the whole camp. And he couldn't face the long walk to find the pack.

How has it come to this? he wondered. I'm afraid to go into the Forest alone.

'This is how it starts,' Renn had told him half a moon before. 'She sends something small, which comes in the night. Something you can't keep out. And the grey moths are only the beginning. The fear will grow. That's what she feeds on. That's what makes her strong.'

Far away, an eagle owl called: oo-hu, oo-hu.

Torak grabbed a stick and jabbed savagely at the fire. He couldn't take much more of this. He was ready: he had

a quiverful of arrows, and his fingertips ached from sewing his winter clothes. He'd ground the edges of his axe and knife so sharp they could split hairs.

If only he knew where to find her. But Eostra had hidden herself in her Mountain lair. Like a spider, she had cast her web across the Forest. Like a spider, she sensed the least tremor in its furthest strand. She knew he would hunt her. She wanted him to try. But not yet.

Scowling, Torak tried to lose himself in the glowing embers.

He woke to a voice calling his name.

The logs had collapsed. The ravens were back in their tree.

He hadn't dreamt that voice. He had heard it. It was familiar – unbearably so. It was also impossible.

Rising to his feet, Torak drew his knife. When he reached the ring of juniper brands that protected the camp, he paused. Then he squared his shoulders and walked past them into the Forest.

The moon was bright. The pines floated in a white sea of mist.

Above him on the slope, something edged out of sight.

Torak's breath came fast and shallow. He dared not follow. But he had to. He climbed, scratching his hands as he pushed through the undergrowth.

Halfway up, he stopped to listen. Nothing but the stealthy drip, drip of mist.

Something tickled his knife-hand.

At the base of his thumb, a grey moth fed on a bead of blood.

'Torak . . .' A pleading whisper from the trees.

Dread reached into Torak's chest and squeezed his heart. This wasn't possible.

He climbed higher.

Through the swirling mist, he glimpsed a tall figure standing by a boulder.

'*Help me . . .*' it breathed.

He blundered towards it.

It melted into the shadows.

It had left no tracks; only a branch, faintly swaying. But behind the boulder, Torak found the remains of a fire. The logs were cold, covered in ash. He stared at them. They'd been laid in a star pattern. This couldn't be. Only he and one other person built their fires that way.

Look behind you, Torak.

He spun round.

Two paces away, an arrow had been thrust into the earth.

Torak recognized the fletching at once. He knew the one who had made this arrow. He wanted desperately to touch it.

He tried to lick his lips, but his mouth was dry.

'Is it you?' he called, his voice rough with fear and longing.

'Is it you? . . . *Fa*?'