

AN INDO-EUROPEAN ORIGIN SAGA

THE TOLL OF FORTUNE

Book III of The Thirteen Fathers

A NOVEL BY

A.J.R. Klopp

For Χλόη,

Σ'αγαπώ για πάντα

“If the legends fall silent
who will teach the children of our ways?”

-Chief Dan George, of the Tsleil-Waututh



The Toll of Fortune
An Indo-European Origin Saga

©2024 A.J.R. Klopp

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

print ISBN: 979-8-35096-448-6
ebook ISBN: 979-8-35096-449-3

CONTENTS

(TIAMAT)

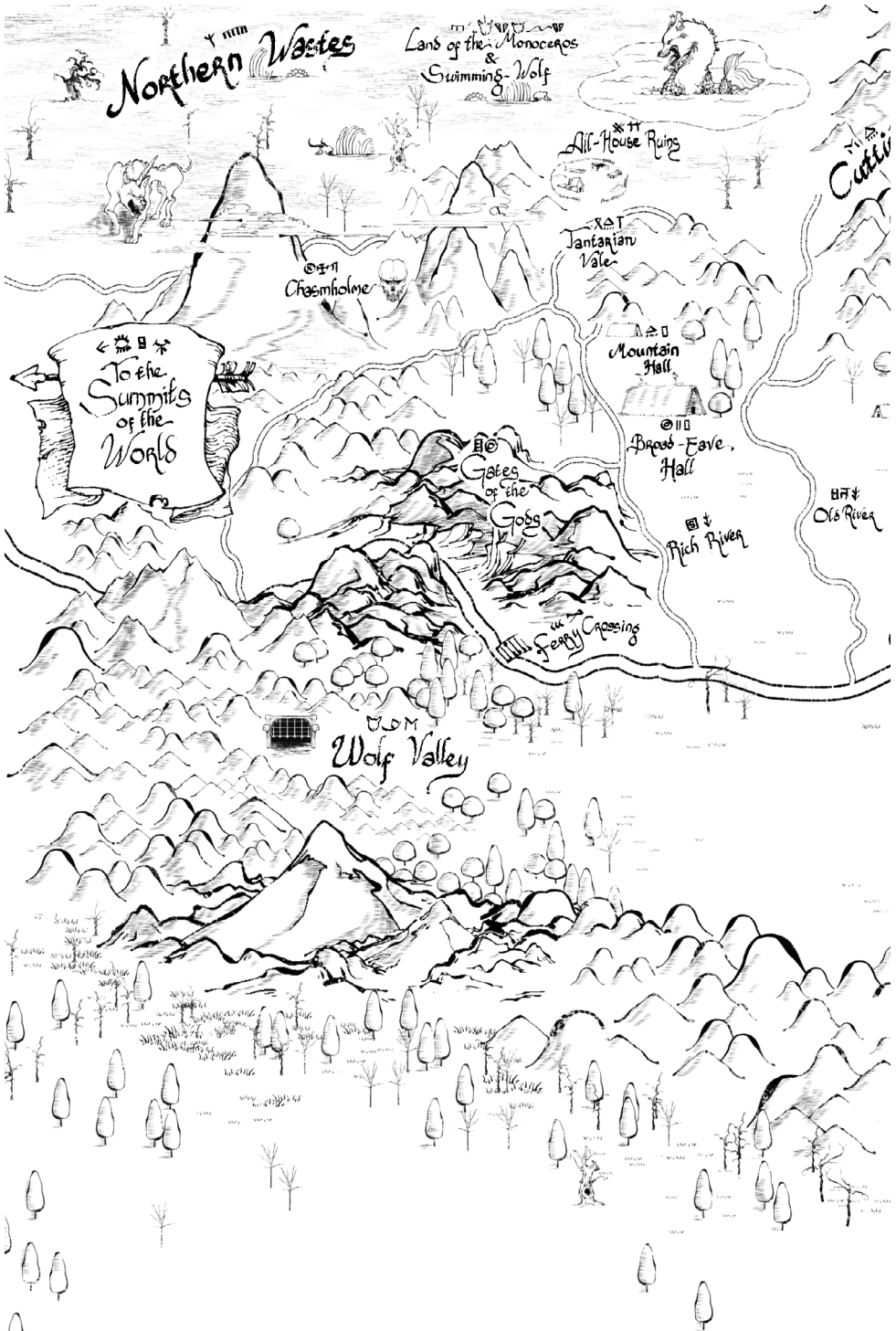
Chapter I	1
Nothing Beside Remains	3
An Universal Wolf	10
The Lone and Level Sands	21
At Tent's Edge	25
Chapter II	33
Some Vile Forfeit	35
Grief on Jaundiced Cheeks	39
The Specialty of Rule	43
To the Base Earth, from the Firmament	52
The Horn of His Hoof	57
Knees of Knotted Oak	62
Caverns Measureless to Man	68
Still Time to Change the Road	73
Chapter III	77
The Sole Drift of my Purpose Doth Extend	79
He's Mad That Trusts in the Tameness of a Wolf	81
The Ample Proposition	89
A Pair of Maiden Worlds Unconquerèd	95
Rings of Smoke Through the Trees	105

(LEVIATHAN)

Chapter IV	111
The Most Unkindest Cut of All	113
Pale and Bloodless Æmulation	119
Then Down the Brave Men Lay	130
The Cat Will Mew	138
And Dog Will Have Its Day	144
Chapter V	151
The Seasonal Eternity of Death	153
The Traveler from an Antique Land	160
With Domineering Hand She Moves the Turning Wheel	169
On the Bat's Back I Do Fly	175
Chapter VI	189
A Toast for Neptune	191
A Fool's Comfort is his Covenant	195
I'll N'y Aura Plus d'Étrangers	200
I Only Dream in Black and White	214

(TYPHON)

Chapter VII	219
Tortive and Errant From his Course	221
Sometimes All of Our Thoughts Are Misgiven	229
Hell is Empty and All the Devils are Here	233
Wide is the Warp of the Weapon-Play	240
Chapter VIII	245
Troy, Yet Upon its Basis	247
A New Day Will Dawn For Those Who Stand Long	255
The Muses, Still With Freedom Found	260
Afterword	269
Dramatis Personae, Geographiae et Gentorum	273
The Calendar of Arēyans	277
Chapter Illustrations	278



Northern Wastes

Lands of the Monoceros & Swimming-Wolf

Cattle

All-House Ruins

Jantarian Vale

Chasmholme

To the Summits of the World

Mountain Hall

Broad-Eave Hall

Gates of the Gods

Fitch River

Old River

Fenchy Capesing

Wolf Valley



ig Mountains

Ruins of Kiri-Kor

Aisib's Mound

The Great Tent

Great River

Great Steppes

Wolf Blood Bans

Great Blue River

The Lost Realm of Vanna

Briny Sea

Shore of the Antean

To Azure Sea and the Obsidian Isle



(Tiamat)

Leviathan awakes.

She haws and gees with languid indifference,

Before she shakes

Her webbed scales at tail's edge:

It rages rain on every land.

Her wrath engaged,

She torsions her mighty flanks,

Impelling muscled iridescence to undulant malevolence:

Flanking peopled shores with thalassic terror;

Mighty and meek find common cause

And common fates.

But now we wish to proclaim this true thing:

Neither God nor Titan can resist her churn,

Nor can we foresee her final swing.

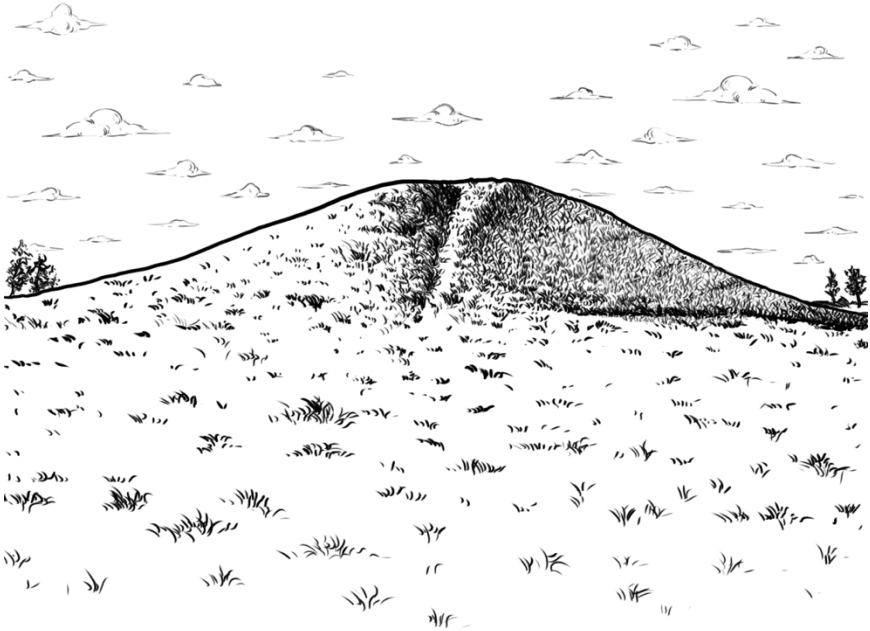
Her wrath, when come full turn, will set the Sun adrift.

Ice that swells like blood in water

Will fill every corner,

And greatness, too, shall go amiss.

CHAPTER I



NOTHING BESIDE REMAINS

Northern Prut River, Moldova, 3409 BC

Green-Shoot shuddered as the wind raked his spiny back. The sun was near setting already. The twisting and snapping of the dead tree-spires raked his nerves still more. He was supposed to be standing watch at the edge of this dirt-hole settlement, but with this fickle wind scattering bones and debris, he could neither see nor hear. What difference did it make anyway, he consoled himself. Only the beds of dead lakes stretched out beyond him. There hadn't even been a visitor in three years—let alone anything dangerous.

There had been a time—he'd been told—when those lake beds had been filled with sweet water and fish—whatever a *fish* was. The Arch-Priest was always droning on about those times. Times filled with plenty. Times filled with farmers and children. Times when travelers came and went. He once even said there were as many as one hundred, hundred Settler Folk who called this wasteland home. He said it was the most prosperous place in the World!

Green-Shoot pulled up his tattered cape against the chill, to little effect. The winds were colder now. The winter came earlier. In two months' time it would be so cold an ox could freeze if it loitered too long on the plain. He'd seen it happen, back when they'd had oxen. Some of those who had stayed here made peace with the consuming cold and chose the lingering death of the frozen ox. It was said to be a painless path to the Underworld. That's how his mom left. And his sister after her.

Even now he could hear the Arch-Priest yammering on from the fire in the distance, some ways up-wind. No doubt he preached that the summers would return, the grass would grow green instead of being swallowed by

the earth, and the Earth-Mother would bless the women with living babies. But the women, like the land, were now barren. There was nothing for him here. Nothing for anyone. This place was as close to death as one could linger without stepping into the void itself.

When he was very young he saw his uncles leave to find better lands. They never returned. Some said the Wagon People took them as slaves. Wagon People, with their cattle and horses, were spotted frequently nowadays. But at least slaves got fed. The only food he ate was dried millet mixed with chaff—the store of which got smaller and smaller. With no other men around his mother made him lay with his sister, and he would *pray* for a stillborn each time: there was no food to feed a child. Cruel Gods ruled these lands now as those prayers were always answered. He'd seen old men die where they lay, skin cleaving to their bones. He'd seen pregnant women open their bellies to relieve their suffering. Worse still, he'd seen the ravenous make an unholy feast of the remains. Still, the Arch-Priest carried on performing rituals and beseeching the Gods.

“O Earth-Mother,” he could hear him say, “the Great Egg from which all life hatches and owes its existence, one who gifted birth to our ancestors in the time of the Awakening... O heavenly Bull, Lord of us all, who foists life upon the desolate earth, who fertilizes the Great Egg with his seed and grants abundance: hear the cries of your grateful servants in this our day of last reckoning!”

Bullshit, he thought. But there weren't even any more bulls.

Amidst the heckling of the wind and its unceremonious disinterment of bones, Green-Shoot *thought* he saw something. There wasn't much light left but he was certain he saw a shape on the otherwise featureless landscape. More wind and dust blew up and he swore he saw it again. He achingly stood upright and sure enough there was a figure. A man approached! Green-Shoot nearly forgot his role as guard. He grabbed his spear and stumbled out to meet the stranger.

“Halt!” he cried, but the winds shouted down his voice. Finally when the man was near he threw aside his duties. “Stranger! Welcome!”

The stranger was dressed in sturdy raiment. He stopped an arm's length away and beheld Green-Shoot feebly guarding the settlement with a crooked spear, tip in the ground.

“Greetings, warden. I come from well-far-away but all here looks far from well.”

“We have had a hard time of it.” Green-Shoot rued, “But no matter! You are come, whoever you are!”

“I am called Snail-Walker. So few of you are still here? When last I was here there were more. Certainly not as many as in the time of my grandfather. But still more.”

“We are only a few now. But come with me now, all will want to greet *a visitor!*”

“Tell me, son, is there still an Arch-Priest here? One they call Soul-Fire?”

“I do not know his name, but you will meet our Arch-Priest.”

Green-Shoot grabbed him by the arm, his excitement barely containable. He escorted him as far as the fire where the light shone upon his face. The Arch-Priest was mid-incantation:

“O Lords of the Settler People,” his voice rang, holding high a figure of a bird-snake shaped like an expecting woman, “who gave us prosperity in days hitherto; who made the rains fall and sun shine in perfect rhythm; who blessed the seeds in the earth and in the wombs of our women, and produced the greatest prosperity that the World has ever seen.”

Snail-Watcher recognized his old friend through decades of wrinkles: “Arch-Priest! Forgive my blasphemy for disturbing your incantation. I come bearing tidings from beyond the mountains.”

The Arch-Priest stopped. He recognized the visage instantly, it was Snail-Walker, his old friend, a man he’d known since youth. It filled his heart with joy to behold not only the first visitor in a dozen seasons but a friend unseen since youth. Travel had made him thinner and swarthy, and his expression was indelicately troubling.

“Soul-Fire!” roared Snail-Walker, forfeiting all pretense of solemnity. The small audience gasped and cheered at the visitor and welcomed him to the fire. Green-Shoot was relieved as all decorum was eagerly forgotten. Gossip and all manner of inquisitiveness abounded. The Arch-Priest Soul-Fire, no less surprised and overjoyed than the crowd, welcomed the visitor

and plied him with what little food and drink they could offer: stringy roast squirrel stew.

Snail-Walker gratefully accepted food, and once the pangs of hunger subsided he began to converse. He told them that he had traveled for two moons over the lands east of the Cutting Mountains, passing a score of abandoned settlements before reaching the fire at what was once the great settlement of Kiki-Kor, where Soul-Fire prayed this very night.

“We must talk alone, friend, and *now*. For there are dark tidings I must speak about.”

“So you have said! But I say speak before us here. We are too few these days for secrets. We have been ravaged by desert, disease, famine and marauders. There is no tidings you can bring that is worse than that which we have already suffered many times.” Soul-Fire’s lips staggered from hunger but his words refused to invite pity.

Snail-Walker surveyed the crowd apprehensively before beginning, “I come from deep within the Mountain-Plains, my friend—the same plains we played on as children. An endless winter has taken hold. The rivers are frozen through. Nothing has grown in the mountain meadows for a generation, and likewise in the plains farther down. Those with strength to travel have left and those without have sought shelter in caves like the first men.”

“Go on, friend, there must be more to talk of than cold or you would not have made this perilous journey,” Soul-Fire urged.

“This is a cold unlike you have ever witnessed. A cold that brings snows even in midsummer and wherefrom the sun hides in every season.” Snail-Walker went quiet. After another long moment he surveyed the ruined landscape. He’d been here as a child, beheld more inhabitants than any man could count—their industry, their plenty. Now there was only rubble and bones.

The words reached his mouth only with great difficulty. “Our Gods have abandoned us to the Primordial Cold. The chill that our forefathers’ ancestors pushed back upon has returned. Snow settles even in the south and never melts, the mountain vales fill with rivers of ice, higher than the tallest trees.”

“But why? the Earth-Mother would never forsake us.”

“Can you not see all around you, friend, she is gone!” Snail-Walker whispered in exasperation.

“Surely, but why now, after so many centuries of peace?”

“Our people abandoned *her*. To the west they have overturned her idols and burned her houses. You are the last priest I have found between here and the Great Blue River. We are no longer under her protection.”

“That is indeed sad news, friend,” Soul-Fire lamented, but Snail-Walker continued.

“It is not the forsaking of our Faith that has brought me here, my tidings are far worse. A preternatural malevolence has awoken and cannot be contained even by the mountains: the Ice Giants have returned.”

“Ice Giants?” Shocked, Soul-Fire coughed. “You mean to say that the ancient prophecies—the ones from *before* the Flood—are true?”

“Just as the tablets promised.”

“The famines... the droughts... the misfortune that has befallen us... our rituals have been in vain,” Soul-Fire muttered in pensive staccato, hemorrhaging his wasted faith with each sputtered word.

“I have witnessed things not seen since before the Great Flood. Men that look like bears, taller by a leg than anyone I’ve ever seen. They have blue eyes, as pale as a winter morn, and yellow fur, underneath which is clear skin concealing their organs like ice. Here.” Snail-Walker tore open a leathern bag and produced a clay amulet. It looked old, especially to Green-Shoot’s young eyes. Very old. Whoever carved it was primitive in kiln-craft. The markings were dull, yet still sharp enough to tell that they said something, even if Green-Shoot could not interpret them. Those ancient symbols had lost none of their hold over Man as the crowd drew silent, especially Soul-Fire.

“What’s it mean?” Green-Shoot dared to shout, though no one seemed to object—the question was on their minds too. “Can you read what the scratchings say?”

“Those *scratchings*,” Soul-Fire barely found the voice to say, “are a warning. A warning from the deep past carried by our ancestors when they settled in the north. It says:

*When the winter comes due
When the Serpent's cold breath
Wilts the flower and unplows the field,
Then the price is paid, first in cold, then in blood,
Then with the Terror before the Flood.
This land is theirs who in the mountains brood."*

Soul-Fire furrowed his brow in concentration and stammered to Snail-Walker, "From what I recall of this amulet's lore, the 'Terror' it speaks of was destroyed... in the *very* distant past. Long before... even the Great Flood."

"They were not destroyed, old friend," snuffled Snail-Walker with finality. "They were sleeping, and now they are awake."

Everyone paused and even the fire's little crackles seemed to fall silent.

"So the prophecy is fulfilled. The Serpent *has* returned. The cold-debt has come due, and the Ice Giants shall have dominion once again." Soul-Fire whispered each sentence with spiritual defeat and bent into a crouch, gazing deep into the fire.

After a *long* while he slowly uncoiled from his crouch: "Be it our doom then." He stood up and shook off the dust. "This is our end and it shall be here, in *our* home. We shall not flee from it. And we shall not wait for it any longer." He motioned to the others to bring more fuel for the fire, anything that would burn, even the last of their possessions. They stripped their encampment of hides and felt. They tossed their meager possessions that could burn on the fire. Dry leaves, twigs, Green-Shoot even threw his spear. Before twilight had completely faded to blackness a great and leaping conflagration spread wings into the sky.

Then Soul-Fire, as Arch-Priest, spoke for the last time:

"You all must decide what to do with the time that remains. There is no more hope. Yet I will not face my demise, and the end of our race, as a supplicant to the numbing cold. Join me in the infernal and be reborn! Do not, and suffer a death over frigid aeons under the crushing embrace of the Serpent and her Giants! Behold! Once we were mighty; now we are weak. Follow me and do not despair."

He sipped a broth from a boiling pot of acrid-smelling herbs, and in minutes his pupils swelled into twin black pits. He continued staring at the fire and incanted:

*“Take me, O wingèd ash-maker!
Return not my soul to the Underworld.
Spread its smoke to the ends of this land,
Let the Serpent sup on the bitter ash of my essence
And choke out her last breath on my hatred!”*

With those words he put one foot behind the other and walked backwards *into* the fire, unbothered by flame—looking Green-Shoot in the eyes. Once in the mound of shimmering logs his cloak and hair leaped to the sky and his skin peeled back like birch bark, while still staring Green-Shoot in the eyes. He was consumed by the flames within moments. One by one the remaining Settler People passed the broth between them and followed their Arch-Priest into the fire without flinching.

Green-Shoot was last to join. The broth was awful and stung his throat, but within a few moments he felt nothing save the vibrations of the roaring flames. The sky opened up above him in rainbow halos. He saw his mother and his sister. He followed the rest of his people, and disappeared forever.

Snail-Walker was all that remained beside.

AN UNIVERSAL WOLF

100 years later

Across the unending plains Wolf's horse plodded slowly. The deep furrows in the arches of his feet, from braided hemp rope, spoke to his weariness. Still, he'd arrived on the cattle range that the Blood-Horn Band called their own, and in the far distance he perceived the embers from the canopy of a large fire. The prospect of a warm fire, however, offered no relief for Wolf: lately foul-craft had been reported throughout this range, and every member of their Band huddled in fear: the *wolf-in-dog-skin* had been seen.

Wolf drew near to the Blood-Horns' encampment and the small crowds drew back in trepidation. The taurine headgear of their shamans cast jagged shadows on the skin-walls of the tent that bobbed and fro-ed in bestial syn-copation. They were perorating an entreaty to Kih'won—the Demi-god Dog that the Sky-Father had bestowed upon their ancestors—to lift the curse of wolf-in-dog-skin, and return their packs to domesticated docility.

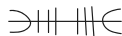
The syncopations petered off as Wolf and his horses rode in. There were few other horses in camp—the Blood-Horns didn't herd them and didn't much care for them. Some said they couldn't ride them. Others said that they were ignorant of them. And some said they looked upon riding as unnatural. But perhaps they just preferred the company of their packs—raising hunting hounds had brought them great renown and prosperity.

A man approached as Wolf drew near, and performed a shallow bow. With a different accent his voice was low as distant thunder but hoarse with grief. "I am Long-Voice, Shaman of the Blood-Horn Band. We have waited many moons for an envoy from the Clan-Father. Fell days have befallen our

Band since the Grass Moon. That was when the wolves-in-dog-skin came. Since then they have thinned our drove, gored our herders and carried off infant-children in the night. No herder dares fodder the cows on open range and the animals waste away on roots and dried fescue. But even these terrible doings are nothing compared to the woe these accursed beasts have done to our packs. They have sundered all bond between man and dog, for now if a man trusts a dog he risks embracing a wolf. Those who do have suffered the morbus-bite. Most die soon after in great pain, though some linger until possessed by an unholy delirium.”

He paused for a good long moment and continued. “Long have we beseeched our Ancestors’ Council for a Beast-Shaman or even a Spirit-Conjurer to perform the rites that will quench Kih’won’s thirst for blood and end our suffering.” His words slashed the cool, late summer air with evanescent blades of breath.

Wolf listened to Long-Voice and studied his face. He steadied his palfrey, relieved as it was to come to a halt after that interminable trot. Wolf gave it a firm pat, grabbed its unkempt mane and dismounted gingerly. “Feed my horses. And rub down their coats with straw.” He pointed to the riders and foot-followers accompanying him. “We have traveled in haste for many days and need rest.” His exhausted words cut the air vividly. The Shaman, concealing apprehension, clapped for the beast-grooms and hay-men, and bid them make haste. “Show me to Wolf-Mane, your Band-Father, for I come to offer help,” Wolf said finally with solicitude.



In truth Wolf did not know what to expect. He hunted beasts, he hunted conjured-things, he chased tormented-souls, and burned or flayed them, and he even hunted sprites and wild-men, from time to time. But he’d never hunted a wolf-in-dog-skin—though he’d certainly heard of them and knew of their cunning and viciousness from the lore.

Long-Voice had relayed the facts faithfully enough. Wolf-Mane *had* called upon the Clan-Father, Ever-Wheel, for help, some seven fortnights ago. His emissary told a tale of such sense-shedding fear that few of Ever-Wheel’s

entourage wished to hear it repeated. Wolf recalled it clearly, he had witnessed the exchange:

It had started with Strong-Axle, Wolf-Mane's brother-in-law, who had gone out hunting in the northern glades as he often did, and never returned. He'd departed with his hunting hounds who did not return either. A dog-master was sent to track them; nor did he return. And, after a half-moon had passed, a party of Blood-Horn warrior-youths was dispatched. Only three returned, haunted like ghosts. They found the den of the beast responsible: it was littered with the carcasses of their brothers and cousins from Strong-Axle's crew; with the bones and teeth of infant-children and children alike; and dying dogs, wasted by disease and poisoned by a quickening of water at the mouth. Investigating further, they were set upon and decimated not by a single beast, *but by an entire pack*. Later the escaping warrior-youths succumbed to their injuries in the most horrific way: foaming at the mouth, possessed of a terrifying aversion to water and biting other men—they had become mad wolves themselves.

Ever-Wheel, Father of the Clan, paused and squinted before he reacted. Finally he burst out in laughter. The council followed along, braying like sheep. Ever-Wheel was as practical as he was cynical. He found their tale amusing, and said that if Wolf-Mane's plot was to ambush his warriors by drawing them out of camp he ought to have tried a less fantastical ruse. In any event, it sounded like the Blood-Horns had an infestation of wolves and nothing more.

He dismissed the emissary and retired from council. But Ever-Wheel's Shaman, the shaman for the entire Clan—the one named *Twelfth*—was not so quick to dismiss what the emissary said. He emerged from the shadows, face painted ceremonially in white, and drew near to Wolf. "No man in this tent can say he knows wolves better than you. How would you judge the emissary's swooning words?"

Wolf was cautious—it would be unwise to openly disagree with the Clan-Father, whose cunning mind was wont to see plots against him. "I will not say if the emissary spoke the truth; judging the mien of men I leave to the Clan-Father alone. Nonetheless, *if* the emissary speaks the truth, I will say that this is certainly not the deportment of wolves or dogs." And he paused with gravitas. "It's the other words that give me pause: those *are* the signs of

the wolf-in-dog-skin—a creature some say is cursed, though I cannot say for certain if that is true. Never have I heard of it in *these* parts, though it is known to the south.”

“Creature of the Gods, *or* accursed beast,” Twelfth agreed, “a sickness that travels by bite, and a beast that conceals itself under the fur of a dog are a coupling that could breed devastation and panic. It is too much of a gamble to dismiss, as Ever-Wheel does. Tomorrow, at dawn, you shall set out with an entourage of your choosing. You shall determine the veracity of the emissary’s claims, and if possible find the source of the carnage and tamp it. May it be of this world *and not of another!*”



According to lore, the wolf-in-dog-skin was a beast-animal, animated to behave like his tame cousin the dog... but in reality he was not a dog, and was not tame, and was instead, as if driven by an ancient spell, a wolf who played in the skin of a dog so that he might lie in wait, and bid his master’s approach. Then he would gore him in the manner of a wolf—but one consumed by Underworldly frenzy. His man-victim, should he survive, would then suffer the curse of the beast. It would devour his senses and drive him mad and he would become a wolf-in-dog-skin himself. No shaman or hunting-master could agree on its provenance. Some said it was an ancient curse from a time before the Forest People, cast by ancient gods in revenge for taming their wolves. Others said it was a dog-affliction on account of some kind of poisoning or brutal treatment. And still others believed it was a conjuring by the Blood-Horn Band’s enemies wherein the beast that lies dormant within all domesticates is unleashed to wreak havoc on that Band.

Wolf, though, knew that men no longer possessed the ability to conjure a beast like this. There *had* been a time when such conjuring was possible. But no more. This wolf-in-dog-skin was not a demon. It was perhaps a spell of the Earth-Mother, worked in the Beginning of Days for reasons none could now divine; or maybe even the result of cross-breeding by the wild-men—Wolf had once seen that. It seemed to be some sort of abomination though: its cunning and viciousness were unnatural. Wolf had mastered many animals, and he’d learned from the ancients that all beasts were capable

of being mastered—that was their fundamental condition, that’s why they did not suffer as men when killed. This *was* a beast like any other in that, even if it could not be mastered, it could certainly be killed.



Wolf soon sat under the tent with Band-Father Wolf-Mane. The Band-Father slumped in front of the fire with his head down, covered by a fur hood dyed a sumptuous red. Wolf crouched to his level and sat.

“Do you know why they call us the Blood-Horns?” asked Wolf-Mane.

“I have heard that it is because your ancestors dipped the horns of their cattle in dogs’ blood to mark them as their own.”

“Yes, partly. But also to protect them from packs of wolves. Our ancestors believed wolves would fear to approach if they could smell the blood of our dogs, thus our herds could range without need of our hounds’ presence. But, of course, we know that wolves will be wolves and will attack cattle—dogs’ blood or not.” He paused again this time with more gravity and whispered harshly, “A great curse has befallen us that only a Spirit-Conjurer or a Beast-Shaman can undo, and yet our Clan-Father sends a *hunter* instead. A hunter named ‘Wolf’ no less!” He scoffed in disaffection, his eyes still trained on the fire.

“A Wolf to know a wolf, Band-Father,” he retorted self-referentially. “It *is* a wolf you say that lives within your dogs? Yes? Then only a wolf shall root him out.”

Wolf-Mane acquiesced with a grunt: this Wolf had wit enough to parry his own bitter words. “I suppose it shouldn’t be a surprise then, that the Clan-Father would send a half-breed to do a shaman’s work!” He laughed clear across the fire, and his nearest sons and sons-in-law barked as loud in complaisance. Wolf remained silent and unmoved, and waited for the sycophantic japing to cease.

“You are right, Wolf-Mane,” Wolf responded, addressing him by given name and no longer by title. “Any, or even *all*, of your dogs could be masked as wolves. And if they *are*... then it shall be *this* half-breed that delivers all of their hides, on the order of the Clan-Father, so that this affliction not spread to his range.”

Wolf-Mane's eyes doffed their thick hoods for the tiniest of moments. The Blood-Horns bred good hounds, famous for their spotted fur. It was their specialty. Surely the wolf-spell hadn't intoxicated *all* of them, but the fear that his whole pack could be culled was enough to drive Wolf-Mane's hostile bearing toward cooperation. Within an equally tiny moment he acceded to Wolf's mission.

"We have traveled far. We desire rest. We will speak on the morrow." That is all Wolf said before he stood up, exited the tent, found a good haystack under shoddy eaves, and fell asleep unbothered by any spells or curses.



Wolf and his entourage slept the rest of that night and much of the next day, and when the Band-Father's warden inquired by midday, Wolf bid him depart at once. He would arise when the time was fit, not before.

Wolf awoke as the sun westered and bid his son, Bear, who'd traveled in his entourage (along with a groom, a midden-keep and an herb-gatherer's apprentice) to wake as well. Bear was a special boy, outspoken, tactless and shrewd like his mother, but also possessing stamina and slow to enrage like his father. His mother had died many years ago while attempting to bear a stillborn child. Bear had only been just-weaned when his mother passed to her ancestors. He had been a hardy child, but he felt her absence—a woman Wolf had loved for many seasons before Bear was even conceived.

Later that evening they all visited Wolf-Mane's tent and heard more tales. They'd heard the shamans tell of recent omens. They'd watched the shamans spill the guts of some swine, prepare some ointments with the offal and apply it to the innards of a cow. After the whole bloody mess had concluded the shamans pronounced some words and the quest to arrest the wolf-in-dog-skin was sanctified. Wolf was relieved when it was over, for only under a bright night sky would the wolf-in-dog-skin show himself, and the full Blood Moon of the harvest would not wait all night.

At sunset, after taking counsel with Wolf-Mane, and accepting a retinue of a dozen Blood-Horn warrior-youths, he set off towards the north-east and didn't stop until very late. They traveled to Strong-Axle's range—site of

the original horrors. Wolf-Mane had admonished this was a waste of time as the wolf-in-dog-skin would have long departed that range, but Wolf insisted.

As they trotted under the midnight moon in full, Wolf sidled up to his son and asked him, “Do you know why we travel to the range of Wolf-Mane’s cousin?”

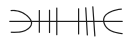
“Because the monster may lie there in wait?” Bear answered with unfeigned earnestness.

“This is no monster,” Wolf chided. “We do not seek a spirit that was conjured by a man or woman. Nor is there sign of a curse.”

His son nodded and allowed Wolf to continue. “But *you are* right, it may wait in hiding in that spot. But, do you know why?”

“To leap at easy prey!” Bear launched back.

“No,” Wolf scolded gently. “To know why a beast hides you must put yourself into the skin of a beast, let its mind become your mind. You must observe the things he observes, speak the sounds the beast speaks, and know the fear that he fears. Then will you know his own reasons.” Bear’s jejeune expression might have elicited a simple response but he knew better than to reply. He knew his father oft spoke in riddles. He continued to quietly ride by his side.



Strong-Axle’s range was an unremarkable land of gently sloping plains and alder brush. It was not graced by any great flowing rivers or fertile valleys. No tumuli stood to impress the traveler of the memory of great men or their deeds. It was marginal land at best, and judging by its barrenness, whatever Farm People (or their Settler Folk cousins) had once farmed here had long since left. But where its erstwhile dwellers had moved on (or been starved out), Strong-Axle has found prosperity foddering his cattle on its grass, protected by his stout packs of dogs.

They knew they had reached the range after fording an impotent stream and discovering the corpses of several dogs scattered about. They drove their horses up onto the rocky embankment, careful to sidestep the rotting carcasses, and then into the brushy highlands above. The horses whinnied nervously.

Without much delay they reached a wide glade in the bush wherein Strong-Axle had built his feasting tent, but no fire illuminated the hearth—it had been abandoned in the early season. Wolf progressed at the head of his posse and scrutinized the site. The camp still contained all its wares: baskets, ropes, blankets, clay saucers and pots and so on, unperturbed and abandoned in a rush. Wolf dismounted without any sign of fear.

“Build a fire in the feasting pit,” he commanded. “Sage! Go fetch herbs. I require woodland moss, grey clay, agrimony, calendula, anything of that sort, and plenty of it. Go. Now!” Sage, the Herb-Gatherer’s apprentice, vanished into the brush to fulfill the command. To everyone else he bellowed, “Bring kindling, logs, leaves, all that burns. Any carrion-meat needs to be heaped on this fire once built. Go, now, and find!”

The entourage diligently retrieved most of what was called for. A stout fire was built and some carrion-meat was tossed over the sprouting fire.

The fire grew large on the wood and larger from the carrion-meat and the store of fat that dripped from it. A dead horse was found nearby and without too much trouble its remains were hacked and sliced, and hoisted in parts over the roaring fire—drawing more flames towards the sky, along with sweet-smelling smoke. There they waited.

“We wait for what, Father?” Bear asked bluntly, tiring from the wait of many hours. “You’ve built a pyre for carrion that not even a shaman could bless, in a tent that has been forsaken by its cursed Band-Father. Are we to attempt to conjure spirits here?” Bear almost laughed, but Wolf’s glance caught him sideways and he dared not let his tone be mistaken for jest. Bear was as reckless in his outbursts as Wolf had been at that age, but that did not make his blasphemy acceptable.

“Strong-Axle has left. His family has left. His livestock have left. But his *dogs* have stayed—though they remain out of sight. Their prints are everywhere and they were the last to leave. They are near and this fire will draw them back.”

“And what then?” Bear asked impetuously. Wolf matched his son’s impetuosity with eyes like daggers. Bear’s countenance retracted and he winced. He drew back his eyes so as not to offend his father, though no blow came from Wolf’s hand, as in the past. Wolf drew nearer to him, between solicitude and righteous anger he seized Bear between the neck and shoulder:

“Your indignant spirit comes not from blasphemy, but from ignorance, and your ignorance comes from youth. You will see the dogs return. And *then* you will see what you are meant to see, boy.”



It was some time later before any dogs emerged from the shadowed brush. They drew near to the fire and stooped or lay. More came. Bedraggled and listless, these dogs were not starving, but they were intoxicated by the scent of flesh rendered by the fire. Wolf watched scrupulously as the mangy horde drew near.

“Every man, draw daggers and draw them low and quietly,” Wolf whispered. He signaled that every man fasten arm-braces, with the herbal *mélange* that Sage had prepared smeared on the skin of their arms. The men had complained of its foul smell, but Sage explained that it repelled the morbus-bite. The dogs came near the fire, many grasping and pawing the piles of carrion. They paid no attention to Wolf or his entourage. Wolf waited still as a stone.

This was Strong-Axle’s pack for they knew the hearth and gorged their fill, sitting around afterwards as comfortably as if their old masters had returned. Some dared approach Wolf and his staunchly seated crew, stopping only a few lengths away. After several minutes of crouching silently one of the dogs perked up its ears. Then others. Then commotion all around. The dogs leaped up and began howling the advent of something terrible. The cry went up around the fire and slowly a final dog came to the fore. The other dogs persisted in their barking but backed off as the final dog sauntered towards the fire: this was the leader of the wolf-in-dog-skin pack: the Wolf-Father.

Its ears flopped forward and it slung its gaze towards its wary cousins, unbothered. Some continued their barking from a self-imposed distance, some squealed in flight, a few held their ground. Wolf kept his torch low. He fastened his own leather-and-bark bracer to his left forearm, with the masticated herbs sandwiched between the bracer and his skin. He arose on his feet but kept still thereafter, holding out his right arm like a rider in ceremonial trot, but with an offering in hand. With his other hand he pulled from his leathern bag an ivory flute, on which he began to play a lulling tune of melancholy notes.

At once the Wolf-Father became alert. Its lazy eyes—recognizing Wolf as if from a past life—betrayed an earnest desire for the companionship of man once again, and to be released from his prison of madness. Wolf cautioned the others to stay back as it drew near in submission and prostrated itself at his feet. Wolf crouched low and drew his hand near ground-level, leaving the offering—a blood and honey-soaked rusk. Its lazy eyes looked exasperated but friendly in their strangeness, and it panted laboriously, drool and foam dripping from its muzzle like some languorous linn. Gently, Wolf continued his anodyne melody, slowly blinking his own eyes in somnolescent rhythm as he caught those of the wolf-in-dog-skin.

Bear and the others now realized this was the beast of beasts and they held their breath: mostly at Wolf's heedless daring to engage it. It seemed so docile, so good-natured and tame. Yet this was certainly the same animal. Its spotted hide—prized among the people of the steppe—was as recognizable as the dawn.

Without betraying a hint of warning, the wolf-in-dog-skin transmogrified. In an instant its lazy eyes turned inwards, and it sprouted arrows for ears. It flared fangs corrupted by black caries. Blood and foam frothed between them like cataracts. As if in rhythm, the other dogs made the same transformation and turned into wolves.

Wolf made the signal: his hand no longer in ceremonial trot, he raised it quickly and harshly slashed it down, drawing out an axe. Bear and his companions leaped forward. The dogs were now gone. The wolves were here. All the wolves.

Wolf held out his left forearm and the Wolf-Father latched on, crunching the brace with such ferocity that it dragged Wolf to the ground, causing him to relinquish the axe. In the conjoined tumble Wolf rolled the Wolf-Father onto the ground in a tackle, and with his right hand free plunged his digits into the beast's eye sockets—ejecting both orbs and freeing them from their bloody sinews with a snap. One rolled into the coals. A stream of steam shot up.

The Wolf-Father—accustomed to ambushing its prey—now shrieked: *it* had been ambushed by a man—a Wolf in man's skin. Without its eyes it cast about snarling and biting the air savagely but fruitlessly. Bear and the others joined the assault on other dogs with daggers piercing fur and axes

crunching bone. The Wolf-Father wailed and zagged and ran in fits. Wolf dared to tackle it again and prized its jaws open to thrust the ivory flute down its throat. Blindly staggering about, gagging on the musical instrument, it wheezed violently in reedy desperation until it stumbled into the coals and its fur caught the fire.

“Kill every dog that does not flee,” Wolf screamed. But he didn’t need to say anything. Each of his entourage, the retinue of Blood-Horn’s especially, launched into the fracas with daggers thrusting. The dogs champed maniacally but the men’s daggers lunged with greater impetus. Fur was rent and blood was spent. In a matter of moments the pack of wolves-in-dog-skin were carcasses themselves, their maws choking on their last breaths of foamy blood.

Wolf kneeled in prayer by the fire as the carcass of the Wolf-Father was consumed by flame. A prayer to Kih’won: may he take back the injured soul of his son and make him whole in the Underworld. Tears passed his shut eyes and hissed on the embers.

One of the wolves-in-dog-skin had punctured Bear’s double horse-hide arm-brace in six spots. Sage repaired to Bear with solicitous speed, removed the brace as gently and precipitously as her skill allowed and applied another ointment of madder and other herbs. Bear’s face calmed as the astringent matrix soothed the inflamed bites. Wolf soon called for a red-hot faggot and pressed it to his son’s medicated wounds. Bear bore the flame with barely a wince and great pride at his first battle scar. Even Sage managed a coy smile.

After resting for a moment Wolf arose. “Everyone to their feet. We ride back for the Great Tent now. It’s a week-and-a-half’s travel. Let us not tarry.”