

For the past week, your nights have been troubled by a persistent nightmare:

A carpenter works in a forest clearing. Bandages are wrapped about her bloody fingers as she works to finish carving something small, hidden in her hands. Around her the trees seem to shift and shuffle closer with each breath of wind and you think you can hear voices whispering in the sounds of their leaves rustling in the wind and in the creak of their bark.

There is a noise behind you, sword or axe on wood? Suddenly the trees around the clearing are moving violently, twisted, humanoid forms ripping from within them, smaller shrubs seem to rise up and shamble towards you, their clawed limbs reaching out; “protect the carpenter, protect the work”, you hear as they pass by you and travel deeper into the forest.

There are sounds of a fight behind you but as you turn to try to see what is happening you realize your feet have become rooted to the floor, bark already creeping up past your knees. A voice sounds in your mind; ancient, creaking, the sound of a thousand trees falling in a forest.

“The bargain must be kept; protect the Throne. Return the Crown to Varushka. Kill the orcs. It is not done until the land is Varushka once more and the crown is bound to a true Varushkan. ARE YOU TRUE?” As the bark begins to creep over your chest, crushing the air from your lungs, you try to say “Yes, by birth, by blood, I know you, I know them, you try to name them, the wardens of the vale the ones from the wood, you try to name your family, your vale, but the bark has crept up your throat and you cannot speak, as the wood closes over your mouth, and creeps towards your eyes, the last thing you see is the carpenter reaching out to you.

She holds a small hexagonal piece of wood in her shattered hands.

“You must come, you must take it.” She says.

The darkness creeps over your eyes and you awaken, your fingers itch and burn as though a thousand miniscule splinters of wood are crawling under your skin, you touch them to your nearest talisman or warding mark and the it immediately ceases.