

The Slow, Sad Return

Harlan is still gripping a woodsman's axe with a dead man's grip, his fingers white and tense.

Tala runs to him and wraps herself around him. Harlan opens his eyes and realises his sister is here. He starts to cough up blood, but says "Told you I'd find you". Salus performs first aid on Harlan, she realises his wounds are catastrophic but somehow he has survived. Although in severe shock he is oddly strong. As she heals him she sees a faint blue light running through his veins. As he heals he finally lets go of the axe. Aethlwynn runs to Tala. Harlan looks to all of us, thanks us and asks what he can do for us. Guru asks what happened to him and Harlan replies that the roots came from below, up through the ground and that there were far many everywhere. Aethlwynn asks where this happens, Harlan replies "The watchtower; it started with the pulse". He looks terrified and says "Like the world's heartbeat". Guru asks him "Who else was here?" Harlan replies that Jon, Elias and Merrin didn't make it, that they were taken. Aethswold asks "Taken where?". Harlan answers "They went straight down like something underground. took them" Guru looks round the compound but sees nothing.

Aethlwynn reminds them of the pit near the sled; Harlan says "That's where they were taken".

Aethswold and Sebastian see Harlan's left hand begin to twitch, almost rhythmically, as though he's matching something beneath the ground, Something that feels alive but alien to us. Something that doesn't seem like possession. Guru looks for a magical link with the hand tremor and can perceive that something is in Harlan, an incredibly brief blue flicker within him that fades. It stays the same as we move Harlan from the Watchtower. Guru continues to monitor using sustaining his detect magic, but this doesn't behave like a spell as the pulse originates in his chest but seems to answer to something far away.

Harlan repeats that he doesn't know how he got there but he felt something take him underground, then next thing he knows is that he was here. Guru is worried that he is transforming and is concerned about taking him back to the town.

Guru looks for Magic on Tala and sees nothing. She has no magical aura and he cannot detect any blue pulses. Guru then decides to investigate the small lodge by the Watchtower.

Aethlwynn gently asks Tala why she ran out from her house and what scared her so much she had to run away. Aethlwynn also reminds Tala that she said she heard voices and asks what they were.

Tala says that she can't remember leaving the house and the next thing she remembers is being in the hut and the door being kicked in. Aethlwynn gently asks again about the voices. Tala looks to the old forest but says she isn't sure, at first she thought it was Harlan calling her, then she heard voices of a woman and child crying for help. She can't hear anything now. Aethlwynn asks what the last thing Tala remembers - it's being put to bed by her mum.

Aethlewynn looks at Tala's feet, but she seems to be physically fine. Perhaps a little too fine as she shows no ill effects after being barefoot in the snow all night. Her clothes seem only faintly damaged and there are no signs of her being taken under ground. Aethlewynn continues to watch Tala but sees nothing more than a frail, scared, little girl.

While Aethlewynn talks to Tala Guru looks in the hut. It has been damaged recently. He finds a flint and steel, 2 torches, 50ft hemp rope, a small kettle, dried venison (4 rations) 2 waterskins (but the water could be stale) and a wooden axe. There are 3 minor healing potions, unfortunately one is cracked and not usable. Under a broken bunk there is a locked footlocker which he drags outside. Guru and Aethswold use the wooden axe to open it find:

2 sets of quilted armour (DEX MOD 3) 1 set of leath armour, a heavy winter cloak bearing the Moonrest Insignia, a small pouch with 12 silver coins and 34 copper coins as well as sealed wax packed labelled "To Elder Saelin if we do not return".

After one more quick look round the site we prepare to leave. The wind instantly drops and the snow starts to fall silently. All bird song stops. Harlan falls silent and looks towards the deep forest. Without warning we feel a deep thrum, a pulse deep under our boots. Something huge has moved under the earth. Harlan's eyes widen as he screams "No!" As another thrum pulses under us he makes a dash for Guru who feels Harlan is much stronger than he should be. Harlan screams out "It's here!" and blue veins ripple across his body.

Aethlewynn again addresses the forest. She cries "We have found our own, it looks like one of ours is also one of yours, can we leave in peace?" But she now knows this is not coming from the forest, it's coming from below. For a brief moment Harlan regains his composure. He mutters Tala's name as he kneels down beside her. He tries to speak but can only cough up blood. He steadies himself and manages to say "Don't follow the" he breaks off mid sentence to look down and say "It's waking". The ground under Harlan explodes up with black roots and they seize Harlan pulling his body apart while pushing it up into the frozen air. Aethlewynn wraps herself round Tala to protect her and to stop her from seeing this. Harlan hangs suspended in the air, his body convulses and his hands start to claw at his stomach and chest. At first his blood runs red, then turns black. Salus tries to hit him with a divine lance. The divine lance is stopped by the roots even though they recoil violently. Guru also embraces Tala. She tries to reach Harlan even though Aethlewynn and Guru are holding her. She cries out "Please don't" and for one moment everything falls still. Harlan regains his focus. He says "Sorry, please save my sister". He looks at peace, even though the roots continue to hold him aloft then draw him deep into the darkness.

Guru picks up Tala. Aethlewynn says "You have taken back your own". The roots drag Harlan into the ground, it's about a minute before he is enveloped and is no more. The clearing falls silent again as snow falls, the ground trembles like slow breath. The forest exhales and deep within something answers, deep and seeming to be from every direction at once. Again the blue light begins to pulse, racing away like live veins from the clearing in every direction. A small narrow wound remains in the soil where the black roots weave around themselves; we see a blue light pulsing through them. Aethlewynn sees the pulse resembles magical energy but running through living tissue. Salus sees it is resembling arteries carrying human blood. She sees that it seems to resemble no known faith but is more biological. The roots do not resemble tree roots as much as a

nervous stem. Aethswold notices the roots are not still, they move very slightly as though breathing shallowly. Guru's detect magic shows the entire clearing is radiating primal and occult energy as well as an energy he cannot identify. Tala is crying and muttering "He promised he'd bring everyone home" She falls quiet suddenly and whispers "It's listening because it's stopped making a noise". Aethlewynn and Guru both hear her.

We head back towards the town but have travelled only a very short distance when we hear a deep, low, ancient note ring out. The trees seem to carry the sound of a mournful call almost like a long call of a horn. Guru feels Tala freeze instantly as she turns to the forest and gasps "No! Not from the old growth, no-one goes in there any more". As we follow the path back it feels oddly unfamiliar and the silence in the forest is overwhelming. Sebastian glances back to the Watchtower, for a brief heartbeat the tower seems higher than before. It is such a brief impression that he wonders if he is seeing things. We pass the sled, and keep heading back. As we pass the site of the previous root attack the remaining thick black roots seem to give under our boots as though alive. We hasten our return.

As we head towards Moonrest Haven we hear the tolling of a bell. 1-2-3, pause then repeat. Tala starts to panic as she hears Elder Saelin's emergency bell, the bell that summoned us those few days ago. She says "It hasn't finished". As we leave the forest and follow the Hunters' Path, we see one of the marked stones has been cracked by the roots which now run through it.

The bell continues to toll as we get closer. The woods, now distant watch us in silence.

Closer yet the gates are open and all faces on the palisades turn towards us. We are greeted by Bran as we enter through the gates. He asks "Where's Harlan?" Aethswold replies "He was taken by the evil in the forest". He bows his head towards Tala. As the terrible news spreads parents instinctively gather their kids towards them and head to their homes. Elder Saelin and two council members run up to us. She has already heard Harlan is not with us but asks "No-one else?" She sighs and says "Then the forest has claimed them." Tala pulls free from Guru, runs to Elder Saelin and collapses in front of her. Her voice breaks as she sobs "I'm sorry it's all because of me. Harlan tried to save me".

As Elder Saelin places a hand on her shoulder the bell stops ringing, but the silence feels heavy. Yselle runs up to join the group. Seeing the black marks from our fights with the roots she asks if any of it came back with us. Aethlewynn replies "Not that I know of". Yselle whispers "This isn't over". Aethlewynn whispers back to Yselle "Tala said that too". Elder Saelin looks the wider community and beckons us to the Long House saying "Best we go somewhere quieter".

Once we are in private Elder Saelin asks for a debrief. As normal Aethlewynn will tell everything she knows. One Council Member starts to pray when she reaches at the transformation of Harlan. At the mention of the horn blast from deep in the forest one of the older Council Members mutters "Haven't heard that since I was a boy. Elder Saelin says "Enough for tonight, we will mourn those that have not returned. No-one will enter the Whispering Woods. You have done more than we have asked". Elder Saelin then asks all the other council members to leave before telling us that she's never had to bury a man the forest refused to give back". She turns to Yselle and asks if she can tell anything from what's on our clothes. Before Yselle can answer Guru hands over the sealed

package to Elder Saelin who says she knows the handwriting, and opens it carefully As Elder Saelin open it we can see that most of the message is soaked in blood and only a few lines are legible. She quitely reads "The pulse beneath the old pines is not an animal. If the bell rings again burn the lower paths" . She says looks at us as says "This was written by Garrick, one of the the leaders at the Watchttower, not a man to panic. If he wrote this then he truly believes there's no coming back". The lower paths have not been used for years but burning them would meant cutting off anyone who is still out there.

She asks us "Before I condem half this island to the flames is there anything that can be done?". Yselle runs her finger over the blood and says "This was not written after the attack. Whoever wrote this had time and knew something was coming".

To be continued....

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