The Corpseriders

The long grass had been dried and bleached by the last few weeks of summer, and now it crunched lifelessly under Dan's boots as she ran. Bracken and heather whipped at her knees, brittle leaves stinging even through the cloth of her britches, but she was too sure-footed to let them slow her down. Ahead of her, a dark shape dashed haphazardly from shrub to shrub, weaving back and forth to make use of every shred of cover. Overhead, a high layer of clouds was just starting to take on the soft, peach tinge of twilight, but it would be a while before the world was dark enough to hide the beast and that gave Dan the advantage. Without darkness to conceal it, its very colour made it stand out against the autumnal shades of gold and grey and blue that swathed the ridge.

An unseen dip temporarily robbed Dan of her line of sight, but then a loud squeal rang out, and a grim smile pulled at her lips as she heard the clatter and rustle of something falling down. She almost fell down herself as momentum carried her into the dip as well, but old reflexes took over where conscious thought could not, and she landed solidly on both feet. There was no time to congratulate herself for that, however, and she was moving again almost as soon as she had her balance. With a quick flick of her wrists she hauled her cloak off her back and cast it out like a net, enveloping the squealing pile of flailing limbs and giving her a modicum of protection as she flung her arms around it and heaved it off the ground.

The goat howled indignantly, kicking wildly against its new prison while Dan cradled it to her chest, panting heavily.

“Little shit,” she muttered at it, then hefted it up towards her shoulder so she could start on the long trek back towards the farm. The goat gave her one last kick for good measure, then bleated plaintively from under the fabric. Dan knew better than to untangle it, however- half a chance and it would escape again, and she was more than done with the novelty of herding livestock for one muggy afternoon. She was no stranger to odd jobs and hard work, but there were times- times like now- when she really questioned whether all of them were worth the room and board they earned for her. Goat chasing was a recent low, but certainly not the worst task she had ever taken on. If nothing else, at least her opponent had been cunning and the exercise was good for her. She'd paid her way to the north by taking up a spot on a rowing crew for a galley, and while her muscles had definitely benefited from pulling the heavy oars, she couldn't help but feel that other aspects of her fitness had gone wanting. Muscles were all well and good, but there were times when endurance paid off more than strength alone.

The goat pissed on her on the journey home, and she seriously considered chucking it on the ground and returning the favour.

Alina was out in the paddock when Dan got back, chucking handfuls of feed over a gaggle of farm birds who were squawking and fussing around her ankles as she limped around ahead of them. She watched with an approving grin as Dan unloaded her burden over the paddock's fence, unceremoniously dumping the goat out of her cloak and back into its native environment. It bleated again, shook itself defiantly, then trotted off towards the little lean-to that served as a shelter for the rest of its kin.

“Ah- Danika! You found him!” Alina beamed, and Dan gritted her teeth, not wanting to say any of the unpleasant things she was thinking about the goat to her gracious employer.

“He wasn't hard to spot,” she said, holding up her cloak to inspect the damage. Alina spotted the large, wet stain in the middle of it, and laughed. Dan didn't find it funny, but managed to hold her tongue.

“Oh dear! At least he didn't do anything worse. You hungry? Dinner's almost ready,”

“Is it goat?” Dan asked, and Alina laughed again. Her irrepressible cheerfulness was really starting to get on Dan's nerves.

“Maybe if he escapes again, eh?” she smiled, and Dan felt that was a fair. “Why don't you drop your stuff off at the house, and I'll get Seya to wash them for you,”

She gave Alina a nod, then bundled her soiled cloak up over her arm and turned to head across the yard towards the farm house. It was a small, untidy looking building, made from old
grey stones piled up and inexpertly grouted with muddy looking plaster. The roof was slate, and came down low to protect the building from the coastal winds that no doubt rocketed in during the winter. Now, though, there was nothing more than a light breeze to stir the air, and Dan wiped the sweat from her brow with one shirt sleeve while silently wishing for a larger gale to cool her. The front of the farm house looked down over the long bluff towards the sea, and Dan paused a moment to enjoy the view. There were ships out there, their sails little more than specks of black against the great grey swathe of water that dominated the horizon. Somewhere far beyond them was Dan's home, and the wide, open plains of the south where she had grown up and learned her trade.

Seya was young and shy, and had a habit of only looking at Dan when there was no chance of them making any kind of eye contact. She was sitting on a wooden bench just outside the door, working a butter churn with very little enthusiasm. Dan dumped the cloak on the ground beside her, then unlaced her tunic and pulled that off too. Luckily, nothing had soaked through to her shirt, although Dan tugged at the fabric and gave it a sniff, just to be sure.

"Your mother says you might be able to wash these for me," Dan told her, and got no reply at all. Seya looked up at her briefly, then looked away again as soon as Dan took notice. Dan stood there for a moment, wondering if she ought to say anything else, then gave up and retreated back to the barn where she was staying. Alina would either call her when the food was ready, or have Seya silently deliver it out to her, depending on which was easiest at the time, although Dan herself preferred the latter. She was not sociable, and much as the farmer and her daughter had been friendly and welcoming, she had no intentions of getting attached to them. That was not part of the deal, and besides, what was the point when Dan would be moving on in a week or two anyway?

There were no men on the farm, but there was a small memorial stone hidden away amid beds of herbs and vegetables behind the house. Dan had found it while digging tubers on her second day of work, and had paused to run her hands over the weathered name carved at the bottom of the list. Alina's husband was not buried on the farm (tradition dictated that he would be interred in a crypt under some local altar-house), but in a way, Dan felt as if his bones and being were still very much present. There was always a third place at the table, even on the days when Dan took her food away from the house to eat, and there were men's boots just inside the door, still caked in mud, as if they were just waiting for their owner to step back into them and stomp off to tend to the animals. Dan had not mentioned it, because it was not her place to say anything. Death found everybody eventually, and yet, it could not be the end; Alina and her daughter still had lives to lead, and that was exactly what they were doing, even if they had to rope in help now and then from passing travellers.

Dinner was broth with large, starchy dumplings, served with a generous chunk of bread and a scoop of home-brewed ale that was not completely disgusting. It was a nice evening, and Dan decided to eat outdoors, sitting on the dry grass behind the barn so she could stare aimlessly at the distant sea while she ate. The clouds were darker now, heavier, yet there was no hint of rain on the air. All there was was the breeze rustling the across the hillside, and the faint sounds of goats and fowl grumbling and clucking quietly in their pens. It was very peaceful, and yet, Dan was not.

She wore a short sword no matter what she was doing, and her hand fretted over the pommel stone, her palm rubbing over it in restless circles. It was an unconscious action, born of too many times being caught unawares, and too many fights that had been settled in blood. Blood invaded her thoughts, and stained her dreams; if her hands weren't on her blade, then she was glancing at them nervously, checking her fingers for lingering traces of past kills. Even lifting her ale mug was a chance for her eyes to scan over her hand, the white skin stretched too tight over her tense knuckles. The world was at rest, but Dan never was. In her heart, she knew that she could never afford to be.

"Mind some company?"

Dan minded very much, but she murmured vaguely and did not protest when Alina set about settling herself in the grass beside her. It looked like a lot of work, arranging skirts like that; Dan hadn't worn a skirt in years, and honestly couldn't fathom why northern women were so fond of them.
“Your clothes are drying over the stove- should be done in the morning,” said Alina, and Dan nodded, but said nothing. “That cloak of yours... wolf's fur, is it?”

She was talking about the collar, and it was, indeed, made from the pelt of a wolf. Dan had killed the beast herself, strangling the life out of it beside a guttering fire, her fingers wet with both their blood. It had not gone easily to its death, and Dan's shoulder still carried the twisted lines of its bite. So, Dan nodded again, and waited patiently for Alina's next question.

“Was it a...?”

Dan sipped her ale before answering. The mug was almost empty, which meant she would soon be out of options as far as delaying conversation went.

“No,” she said, and a faint look of relief washed over Alina's pleasantly plain features. She was a vaguely round woman, with a strong jaw and a short nose, and a pattern of uneven white smudges on her dark skin that crossed the bridge of her nose and the tops of her cheeks. Dan was similarly marked, but her complexion was more dusky, and her piebald patches were smaller. She bore three spots along each cheekbone, each of them like a little dab of white paint, save for the one directly under her left eye, which was almost black, like an oddly diffused mole. Mixed skin was a mark of the iylmin people, but black spots were not, and sometimes people reacted oddly to it. Dan cared about very little in life, and rarely concerned herself about what people thought of her, but that mark did weigh on her mind. Even now, she was wary of the fact that Alina was sitting on her left, where it would be more obvious.

“But you've seen them, haven't you? Killed them?” Alina pressed. Dan looked at her mug, contemplating downing the rest, but held back.

“Yes,” she said.

“What are they like? Up close, I mean- can you... can you tell when you see them, or...?”

Dan cast her a sidelong glance. She understood that people were curious, but the questions grew tedious and she did not like pointless conversations. Despite that, it was not vapid expectation she saw on the other woman's face, but rather, an intense expression that was somewhere between hopefulness and worry. Dan frowned.

“Sometimes. The wyrd ones- their eyes have this green sheen to them, but you don't always see it until they're up on top of you. The uul, though- they're easy to spot,”

“Can't miss a giant wolf man, I suppose,” Alina agreed, laughing nervously. Dan grunted in agreement, and finished the last of her drink. She had a feeling she was going to need it.

“And you hunt things- things like them?” Alina asked her, then carried on talking quickly, as if she was afraid Dan might interrupt her. “I mean, I know I never asked and you never said, but- but that is what you are, isn't it? A hunter? I heard they have them in the south, but we don't see folk like you in these parts much, if ever,”

“They told me at the docks that hunting is illegal in these parts,” Dan replied carefully. She hadn't been in the north for long, and had been doing her best to keep a low profile- at least until she had established a better grasp of local customs. Knowing the language was one thing, but it was amazing how many small differences there were in basic practices and behaviour, despite the relatively small stretch of water that separated the large northern isles from the myriad of smaller ones that made up the south.

“It is,” Alina confirmed. “Can't think why, but that's how it's always been. Doesn't mean people don't do it, though,”

“M'hm. I bet,” Dan sighed. She eyed her empty mug forlornly, then put it down in the grass. “You have something you want to tell me about?” she asked, and suddenly it was Alina's turn to stall. She fidgeted with her skirts, smoothing them over her knees and thighs and picking at the straw and mud that had collected on the hems. She was wearing heavy boots under them- men's boots, by Dan's estimation- and yet there was the skirt over the top, making sure that she conformed to whatever strange notions of femininity that the north held sacred.

“No,” she said at last. “I just... do you have any children, Danika?”

“No,”

Never had, and never would, as far as Dan was concerned. Perhaps she would have liked
to have a family, if she'd lived another life, but frankly she just didn't have the time and she did not regret it.

“I love my girl,” Alina told her. “She's been my best friend since the day she was born, but now it's like I've never met her. And you can take it for a while, and think it's just the age she is, but...” she shook her head sadly, her voice trailing off. Dan's frowned deepened.

“You think she's not herself?”

“I know she's not, but not how you mean. That's my girl, it's just... something got to her. Emotionally, I mean. Scared her witless, and she's just been a shell of herself ever since,”

Dan glared at the far horizon. The evening was coming to a close, and the clouds were starting to take on a heavy golden tint as the last of the day's sun did its best to press through them. Soon, the light would fade and the overcast night would blanket everything in darkness.

“What did she see?” Dan asked.

“She said it was a Fall, but I never saw it come, and nobody heard a thing. Can they do that, Danika? Can they come down silent?”

“No,” said Dan flatly. “Tell me where she saw it.”

They came from the sky, plummeting from the unseen void to puncture the clouds and spread their diseases across the land. Dan had seen them, and she had heard first hand the devastating roar of their arrival. Larger ones could rupture eardrums when they landed, but all of them tore up the earth and scorched the ground around their craters. Despite that, the gully that Alina had directed her to was oddly intact, and showed no signs of recent upheaval. She paced along its length, her eyes roaming back and forth in search of any sign of disturbances. The ferns were deep here, forcing her to more or less wade through their whispering fronds, but there were no gaps in the undergrowth- no patches of burned grass, no matter how small. No Fall appeared to have landed here.

Dan's search was not entirely fruitless, however. As she turned to begin the long walk back towards the ridge, something caught on her boot and made her stumble. A careful look beneath the leaves revealed a shoe, weathered and ragged, the leather badly degraded from months of abandonment. Dan held it up, peering at it curiously. It was narrow, and fairly small- too small for Dan's feet, at any rate- but it was definitely a woman's shoe. Part of a lace was still strung through the eyelets down its length, and the opening showed signs of having been scalloped and embossed with some kind of pattern. Dan sniffed it, then recoiled: it had a stink that was more than just old leather, and sadly, it was a smell that she had come across many times before.

She sat down on the sloped side of the gully, making a place for herself amid the undergrowth so she could investigate further. The buckle of her belt was home to a pair of short daggers, carefully hidden behind the leather to appear almost invisible, and she fished one out and used it to prod apart the shoe's opening so she could see inside. The sole was blackened and rotting, but there was a reddish discolouration that was neither mud nor mould. She sniffed at it again, just to be sure, then held back the urge to retch. Something inside the shoe had been disturbed by her prying, and the stench of rotting flesh was suddenly a lot stronger. She delved deeper, holding her breath while she jabbed at the shoe's interior with the blade. There was definitely something stuck inside, and with a little work (and a lot of gagging) she managed to pry it loose.

It was a toe.

Or rather, it had been a toe, at some point. Now, it was a gloopy mess of fatty decay, the bone more or less encapsulated in a blackened blob of spongy old meat. A toenail was still clinging to the mess, but only just; Dan looked at it where it was now resting in the shoe's heel, and tried to imagine what it had looked like before it had been severed. More to the point, she tried to imagine what the rest of the foot might look like. A woman's foot, with a toe fleshy enough to still be decaying even though the shoe had been lost for quite some time. Dan put the shoe down, and stared at the undergrowth, wondering what other grim trophies she might be able to fish out from under the leaves.

She'd left at first light, and now the morning was slipping by. She had chores to do in
exchange for her room and board, but something about the gully was bothering her and it was hard to just walk away. The creatures that the Falls left behind were vicious and volatile, and even a small one would be more than capable of yanking off an iylmin's foot. What they could not do, however, was stray too far from the evil rocks that spawned them. Dan did not know why that was, but it did mean that if the foot had been removed by such a beast, then its lair- and it's Fall- had to be fairly close by. But where? Common banditry would also explain the foot, of course (albeit a fairly grisly attack, even for lawless thugs), but then why would Seya say that she had seen a Fall?

A long time ago, before the sky had been ruined, the iylmin people had been able to see the stars. Dan looked up that way now, her mind wandering to the hidden beauty of a clear night sky that she had never seen. She had read books that described 'falling stars' but they were distant things- things that never came down low enough to punch through the clouds. It could not have been that. A trick of the light, perhaps, or somebody playing with some old device filled with flash powder, though that was unlikely, too. Flash powder was rare and expensive, and on the whole it would produce a light that went up rather than one that appeared to be coming down. She cast another wary eye over the gully and the surrounding slopes, but could still see nothing that would suggest a Fall had been here.

Or could she?

A though pressed its way into Dan's mind, and she got up slowly, carefully retreating up the slope to look at the gully from a slightly different angle. It ran down the side of the hill, but its edges were deep and sudden, and while she was certainly no geologist, she could see no evidence of a waterway that might have carved it out. Not only that, but now that she was looking closely, she could see other gullies- shorter ones- rising up the other side of the valley. Bushes and bracken had filled them well, but they were definitely there, and all of them ran at strange angles, not quite following the natural slope of the hills but rather, all pointing towards one part of the valley floor.

So, a Fall had landed here, but certainly not recently. Plants grew quickly enough, but it could have taken years for the ground to heal itself enough to support them. The Fall would have scorched everything, and the ash it left behind would have been toxic, so filled with sulphurous poisons that nothing could have taken root until the ash had been washed away or broken down. Dan knew that process alone could take decades, and this crater was so well hidden that she could only speculate at how much time had passed. She doubted it was within living memory. If it had been, she would have assumed that Alina would have known about it, and mentioned it.

There were still unanswered questions, however, and even a few new ones. For one thing, a crash site was just that- a place where a Fall had been- but the Fall itself appeared to be missing. Dan raised a hand to shade her eyes, squinting at the pattern of gullies and trying to estimate how large the Fall had been. Not small, certainly, and big enough to do a fair amount of damage to the landscape. Big enough that it should still have been here, unless the locals had broken it apart and gotten rid of it. That wouldn't have been an easy task, and in order to do it they would have had to have disposed of whatever nightmare the rock had brought with it. Things like that had a way of passing into legend, and areas where such battles were fought were usually remembered and talked about for generations to come. Alina would know. If she was as reasonable as she seemed, then Dan had to assume that it was information she would willingly share with a hunter whom she was sending to such a place.

Dan pursed her lips, and glared at the bottom of the gully. She wanted to take her sword to the undergrowth and search for more evidence of violence, or any other possible clues, but it was a huge area and she was just one person. She had discovered the foot purely by chance, and there was no guarantee that she would be so lucky again. What she could do, however, was walk to the middle point of the site, and see if there was any evidence of the Fall itself still lying about. If it had been broken up and moved there could still be small pieces of it hidden under the grass, but what would be the point? What new information would that really give Dan, other than conclusive proof that the Fall had been there at some unspecified time in the past?

Reluctantly, she decided that it was time to go back. She would tell Alina that she had found nothing, and perhaps probe a little deeper and see if the other woman was hiding anything, or
if she really did have no idea that her farm was less than half an hour's walk from an ancient crater. Still, it bothered her. All of it— the phantom Fall, the ancient striations cut into the side of the hill. It wasn't the strangest thing she had come across in her long career of chasing beasts, but something about it was sitting wrong in her gut, although perhaps that was just hunger. She'd left so early that Alina hadn't finished making breakfast, although she'd promised Dan a hearty bowl of porridge when she got back to the farm. Dan was looking forward to it.

She turned away from the valley and began the long walk back. She was slow, partly because of the climb and partly because she didn't really want to leave. Walking on the slope at the edge of the gully was hard work, so she slowly found herself gravitating back into the ferns that filled its base, and even kicked half-heartedly at their stems, her head bowed to look for any signs of more body parts hidden beneath them. She could hear the undergrowth rustling behind her as the stems righted themselves in her wake. In a few hours, and with a bit of help from the wind, they would likely look exactly like they had done before she had arrived.

Again, her foot caught on something. She cursed quietly to herself, and adjusted her footing, but there was nothing obvious when she peered at her boot to see what she had tripped on. Certainly nothing suspicious— just some old, dried plant stems and a few visible roots. Dan frowned at them, and vented her mild frustration by stamping on the roots, just because she could. A few paces on, however, it happened again, and this time the trip nearly sent her flying. She yelped, and hopped forwards, trying to regain her balance and avoid falling headlong into the gully. Heather and bracken would not make for the softest of landings, and if nothing else, it would be terribly undignified. Luckily, there was nobody around to witness it— though that did not stop Dan from taking a good look around, just to be sure. The bluff appeared to be deserted, and she sighed with relief, quietly hating herself for caring about something so trivial. Her ankle was aching, and she lifted her foot to wiggle it a bit, testing it out to see if she might have twisted it. It was painful, but she doubted it was anything serious.

The second her foot hit the ground, something grabbed her. A sudden, snaking rush at her heel quickly slithered up to encase her whole foot, and Dan didn't even have the time to cry out before it yanked her off her feet. She crashed face down into the greenery, coarse leaves scratching at her cheeks and arms as she landed. Another sharp tug on her foot sent a shock of pain shooting up her leg, and then she was sliding backwards, the rough ground bumping at her belly while ferns snapped under her and slapped at her sides. Dan screamed, outraged, and kicked out with her free foot. Something that felt like a dozen boneless fingers tried to catch it, grabbing at her ankle and calf while she struggled. Hidden stones banged into her ribs, and she scrabbled at the quickly passing ground, tearing up chunks of grass and mud and plants as she tried to find something solid to cling on to. The gully offered her nothing, and despite her best attempts, her free foot was quickly caught and subdued.

Furious, Dan tried to roll herself onto her back and draw her sword. She could do nothing face down, but if she could see what was attacking her then perhaps she could give it a taste of its own medicine. As soon as she started to wiggle, whatever was holding her began to thrash about as well. Suddenly, it wasn't just the lumps and bumps of the gully she had to worry about, but also the sides as she was hurled into them, shaken back and forth over and over. And all the while she was still being hauled backwards, down and down towards the valley floor.

Suddenly, everything went dark. The possibility of unconsciousness crossed Dan's mind, but the taste of earth in her mouth and the muffled rumbling in her ears suggested otherwise. Seconds passed as she writhed against some kind of confinement, and then she was falling. She landed heavily on springy, slimy soil, and coughed up a foul mouthful of mud before gasping for breath. The air tasted stale, and there was a pervasive stench of mushroom-y dampness. There was something else too— a smell like rotten eggs, faint yet distinct, and it sent a jolt of ice down Dan's spine. As the echo of her coughing faded, another sound reached her ears: slick, yet somehow mechanical, like something chitinous squirming around in soup.

It was pitch dark, but the iylmin had been born in the dark, and they were well equipped to deal with it. Dan steadied herself, taking advantage of the momentary stillness to gather her
thoughts and slow her breathing. Her hand went to her sword, slipping it from its scabbard with ease and instinctively testing its weight in her hand. At the same time, her hands erupted with light. She felt the white skin of her fingers swelling slightly as they perfused, and a brilliant, blue-white luminescence chased back the shadows. Her pupils constricted, but she was far from blinded: by contrast, a dozen or more shapes scrambled for cover, twig-thin arms flailing to cover haggard faces as the creatures scattered. Dan glared at them, but they were not the first thing on her mind: the hidden cavern was not huge, but it was large enough to hide a vast black rock which dominated her view.

It was the Fall, and it was alive. Thick, ropey rivulets of slime oozed from its craggy surface, some appearing to grow into pale, silvery feelers and vines which slithered about on the floor. Older ones- drier ones- crossed the ceiling and walls, forming a strange and alien network that looked almost like roots. Around her ankles, a similar clump was quickly working their way up her legs, wriggling like angry worms around her knees as they tried to bind her.

She cut them off with ease. They were strong, but her short sword was sharp, and a few well placed thrusts scattered the strongest of them. The smaller tendrils thrashed and writhed, and she sliced them off as low to the ground as she could manage without cutting her own legs.

The shock of the light wore off quickly, and now the shapes were coming back, peering at her from the shadow of their stone progenitor. Dried and leathery iylmin skin hung limply from the skeletons beneath, and hollow eyes wept globs of silvery gunk. Hairless animals staggered between them on all fours, exposed bones showing through dripping tears in their ancient hides. Dan knew at once that they were corpses, but that did not mean that there was not life in them. The Fall itself was in them, its cursed protoplasm slithering in the gaps that once held organs, and muscles, and sinew. There was nothing here that could be saved, but there was revenge to be had- for her skinned knees and battered ribs, and for the people that the terrible rock had consumed from the inside out.

She lifted her blade, and stepped forwards. The sword caught the light of her blazing hands as it swung, and the dull echo of brittle limbs being snapped filled the air. They clawed at her, split fingertips with protruding bones slashed at her like talons, and old, sharp teeth snapped at her knees while gurgling growls and cries filled the air. Dan staggered through the growing throng, the very ground beneath her feet twitching and trembling as the Fall's tendrils tried to grab and trip her. But she was an old hand at this, and the creatures were clumsy, and withered. Heads fell, then crunched under her boots as she stamped them down into the spongy ground. Spines splintered as she lashed out, and old skin split and frayed as she yanked her sword free again.

And then there was quiet. Dan stood, panting, amid the twitching remains of the bodies. The Fall's blood leaked from their wounds, soaking into the soil or slithering away as newly formed tendrils. She looked up at the rock itself, and felt with certainty that it was looking right back at her.

"Well?" she rasped, then spat out a few more grains of dirt and tried again. "Anything else you want to try before you go?"

It seemed to shiver, and a fresh wave of slime spurted from the unseen cracks in its crust. A shape began to form, crystallising and congealing in the spreading pool of filth. At its centre, Dan's light reflected off the glistening folds of a primordial brain, and a growing network of ichor-filled vessels began to stretch and twist as they elongated and thickened.

Dan stepped forwards, and slammed her sword through the middle of it before it even had a chance. Steam erupted from it as she pulled the blade out again, and the mass of infant tentacles convulsed, then decayed, their half-made muscles quickly returning to the slop that had birthed them. Above the melting mass, the dark stone of the Fall was silent; whatever monstrosity it had tried to birth had been its trump card, but it had played its hand, and it had lost.

Dan was half way up the hill when she heard the soft rumble of the cavern collapsing. Without the Fall to keep them vital, the limbs and tendrils holding the space open were decaying, just as the creature itself had done.

Dan paused, and turned back to look at her handiwork. She had used the Fall itself to climb up to the ceiling and then had hacked her way through its false roots to escape; now, she
watched the escaping clouds of steam and evaporating ichor, and smiled as the morning sun cast faint rainbows through them. She rarely saw beauty like that; her life did not give her the chance to seek it out, and her work did not usually show her any. In an hour (or even less) the steam would be gone, and all that would be left would be a muddy hole, and an old lump of stone, half buried in soil. Finally, the valley would be able to show the scars that the Fall had inflicted on it, and the missing crater at its heart would be revealed.

The goats bleated at her moodily as she trudged past their paddock, but Dan ignored them. The farmhouse door was open, and she could hear tuneless singing coming from inside. The smell of cooking meat wafted through the air, but Dan found that she had lost her appetite. It happened sometimes, when she saw the nastier things that the Falls brought with them. A few hours and a good sleep would cure her of it, though. A bath would probably help, too.

Alina was in the kitchen, stirring a pot of stew. A cleaver rested on a large wooden board on the table, still bloody, and a bucket full of feathers and gristle sat beside it. Dan leaned herself in the doorway, and said nothing. It took Alina a moment to realise that she was there.

“Oh!” Perhaps it was Dan's torn and bloodied clothing, or her mud-streaked face, but the sight of her seemed to rob Alina of all her colour. She dropped the ladle into the pot, and stared, wide-eyed, and lost for words.

“I found it,” said Dan, and Alina gawped at her.

“...found...?”

“The Fall. The one Seya must have seen,”

“Oh,”

An uncertain smile pulled at Alina's face, but could not quite erase her look of shock. Suddenly, though, she seemed to find herself, and rushed forwards to pull out a chair at the kitchen table so she could usher Dan into it.

“Are you alright? Here-” she bustled away, almost tripping over her own feet as she hurried to grab a mug and fill it with goat's milk. Dan took it from her, gave her a quick nod of thanks, and downed half of it in one go. Her dry throat thanked her for it, and helped to chase away the taste of mud and the lingering tang of sulphur. “What happened?”

Dan looked at Alina for a moment, then put down the mug.

“I'm a hunter, Alina. I did what hunters do,”

“I don't understand- did you... what did you find? Have you killed it?”

“Most of it,”

Dan didn't think it was possible for Alina to get any more pallid, but suddenly it was hard to tell which parts of her face where naturally pale and which were not.

“What was it?” she asked. Dan finished the milk, and glanced at her fingers before letting her hand stray across the table towards the chopping board.

“Parasite,” Dan replied. “It's been down there in the valley for years, living off anything it can catch. Makes it easier when people are feeding it, though,”

“Feeding it?” Alina gasped, and covered her mouth with one hand, shocked. Dan picked up the cleaver, and examined her dirty reflection in the half-dried blood and clean steel of the blade.

“It happens. Either a Fall gets inside people, or people think they can appease them by doing what they want. Makes it easier in a remote place like this, though- small farm, the odd vagrant coming through, looking for work and then moving on. Nobody misses folk like that,”

Alina shook her head, denying what Dan was implying even before she spoke.

“I don't know what you think you're saying, Dankia Echo, but-”

“Take your boots off,” said Dan, cutting her off.

“What?”

“I found a foot down in that gully. My guess is, it either came off you or Seya. What happened? Did they mess up your husband too much to let him come back?”

Alina stood up suddenly, backing away towards the stove. Dan stayed where she was, carefully testing the weight of the cleaver in her hand. She preferred her short sword: it was better balanced, but that was hardly a surprise. Cleavers were not generally made for fighting with.
“How long have you been up here, pretending to be alive, Alina?”

“I-”

Dan twisted in the chair, raising her arm as she moved, and let the cleaver fly. It caught Alina in the face, cutting off her answer and digging deep into her skull. A few trickles of old, brown blood escaped around the blade, and then thick, yellow ooze began to slowly pulse out instead. It hissed and bubbled over the remains of Alina's face, and her body began to deflate. A nasty popping sound filled the air, along with the heavy, putrid stench of flesh left to decay without air to aid it. Dan watched, impassive, as Alina's corpse collapsed, and her ancient, brittle skeleton crumbled without the Fall's slime to support it.

A quiet gasp from behind her caught her attention, and she looked over her shoulder. Seya was peering at her from around the door that lead to the farm house's modest living room.

“You know, one thing I have to wonder, though, is why your mother decided to send me down there,” Dan said to her. “I know you northern folk don't exactly have hunters any more, but I didn't think you'd be so stupid,”

“She said southerners only know wolves,” Seya replied. She stepped out, shuffling into the kitchen meekly, but for the first time she met Dan's gaze. An emerald sheen glittered in her eyes. “You know more than that, though,”

“If you want to live as long as I have, then you have to know all sorts of things,” Dan replied. She stood up with a sigh, and drew her sword. “You going to make this easy?”

“I don't want to die,”

“You think I care what things like you want?” Dan asked, but Seya's head was on the floor before she had a chance to say anything, and Dan watched as the slime leached out of her, bubbling away as it spread across the kitchen flagstones.

There were clothes stored in an upstairs bedroom, piled up in trunks and stuffed into satchels hung up on the walls. Men and women had come through this place, and from the looks of it, none of them have left again. Dan wondered what lies had been told to them in order to lure them down into the gully, or if any of the revenants she had seen had once worn the items she pulled out to inspect. Among them, she found her tunic, and also her treasured cloak, both of which had indeed been cleaned and dried. Dan rooted through the rest for anything she could salvage to replace her britches and ruined shirt, but refrained from taking anything more than that. She preferred to travel light, and it made more sense for her to take food than excess clothing.

She left before the sun began to fade, making sure to open the goat paddock as she passed it, so the animals had a chance to forage for themselves along the bluff. The little black goat bleated at her as it scampered past, then stopped, and looked back as if it was expecting her to chase it. Ahead of her the open moor stretched on, eventually dipping down towards a distant band of forest before the mountains rose up at the horizon. The north was a vast and unknown land to her, but Dan had come here anyway, and somewhere out there were other horrors that needed to be faced.

Behind her, smoke billowed up from the farm house's chimney, and then the windows, and eventually the door. The flames would burn long after Dan could no longer see them, and nobody but her would ever truly know what had happened there.
If you enjoyed The Corpseriders, and would like to read more about Dan and her adventures, please join us at www.aegisimmemorial.com for updates and news.