

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.

Suddenly the trees 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 come towards you, their branches whipping out to catch in your clothes and skin. You try to fight, but they overpower and overwhelm you. Tendrils of vine creep from their branches towards your eyes and your ears, you feel them pressing, invading, finding their way into your skull. A voice sounds in your head.

Deafening.

A crash of thousands of trees falling, screaming.

“The bargain must be kept; You are not Varushkan, this is not your blood not your land. BE GONE!”

The trees begin to pull tearing your limbs and skin apart, pressure builds tearing at your limbs, your skin begins to break and blood pours from your wounds. You try to shout, to scream at them;

“I want to help you, I am a friend to Varushka, I know you, I know them!” You name them, the wardens of the vale, the ones from the wood. Suddenly, the pressure eases, as though the trees are fighting the one that controls them, but its will is absolute and soon they begin again.

But now there is another voice in your head, this time many voices speaking together, varushkan voices, familiar. You know them. The wardens. They whisper:

“Ash from the hearth, a gift from a boyar, a plait of hair from a wise one, a host’s blessings for their guest, the mark of a child, a talisman of a warden. These would have concealed you, what it cannot see and cannot smell it cannot know.”

The force becomes too much and you feel your body begin to rend apart, before you is the carpenter. She holds a small hexagonal piece of wood in her shattered hands. “You must come, you must take it.” She says.

You awake screaming, feeling as though you have been ripped apart by the trees.

For a minute, your fingers itch and burn as though a thousand miniscule splinters of wood are crawling under your skin, you try to touch, your body, your eyes, your ears and reach out for those familiar objects around you to feel safe and secure once more and the itching ceases.