

A Cold Night in Bryalshire

By Christopher Epley

The cold night wind that swept through the castle corridors only added to the anxiousness of Ewan Reid who was sneaking his way out of the castle treasury. Ewan was the most trusted treasurer of the king himself but what he was doing would most certainly get him thrown into the great palace's dungeon by the Crownguard if caught. For months now every night after the day's commerce Ewan would take a small amount of silver and store it away in his quarters. In his quarters located on the second level of the castle there was a brick loose in the wall behind his bed, he would remove the brick nightly and store the stolen silver pieces to be saved for a later date. By his count Ewan had stored around one hundred pieces of silver and the time had come to complete his quest.

Ewan made his way to his room as he had so many nights before, carefully removed the loose brick hidden from his bed and placed the final handful of silver pieces into the cloth drawstring sack. A quick count revealed he had one hundred and twenty silver pieces total, more than what was asked of him to deliver. Ewan packed a few essentials in a larger drawstring sack, a dagger, canteen, compass, two health potions from the apothecary, a forged letter of passage from the Crownguard needed in case he would be stopped by a Crownguard soldier on the trail out of the kingdom of Bryalshire and a map with his destination marked. Ewan tied a bedroll to his sack, took one last look around, blew out the candle and made his way out the door.

Ewan made his way very quietly down the long corridor leading to the back stairs of the west wing of the castle. The west wing would lead him to the stables where he could procure a horse and make his way out of the palace that held the great castle of King Alwin Raynard of Bryalshire. Ewan never disliked King Raynard in fact he thought the King was a benevolent and just ruler, a fierce warrior who was not afraid to fight on the front lines with his troops. King Raynard also showed compassion to his people and put them above all other things the crown was involved with. There was relative peace minus a few skirmishes with the Orcs of the south or a few renegade gangs on the outside of Bryalshire who preyed upon travelers. Then of course there were the monsters, outside of the kingdom of Bryalshire and every kingdom for that matter monsters roamed the night and only the bravest of people and soldiers dared travel at night. The Draugr were the monsters most common outside of Bryalshire, not many knew their origin but the legends say they were once men who were cursed by Crones for breaking a deal bartered with them. Others say they were slain soldiers risen from the dead from Vampire lords hidden among the continent, caught somewhere between life and death. Whatever their true origin they fiercely attacked travelers and ate their flesh sometimes leaving nothing but bone left to be discovered in the daylight.

These thoughts were filling Ewan's head with possible regret especially making the journey at night but he knew what he was doing was right. It was a Magi after all that had come to him with this whole ordeal. The Magi were the great magic users of the world and used their knowledge of magic to try and better society and protect the world. The Magi were peacekeepers and worked closely with the Crownguard and the King himself, they even had a temple located in the large courtyard of the castle where the council of Magi conducted their affairs. It was a chance visit with the High Magi himself the leader of the council of Magi that started this all.

Ulin Khudel was the High Magi when Ewan came to the temple to collect on the taxes owed by the Magi, Ulin was visibly shaken when Ewan made his way in.

“Ah Mister Reid it is good to see you, allow me to fetch the payment for you. 20 gold crowns should do it correct?” Khudel said

“Yes master Khudel 20 gold crowns is the rate, are you alright master you seem preoccupied?” Ewan asked

With a rather concerned look displayed on his face Master Khudel replied “Have you noticed that silver pieces are being phased out as the currency of the crown?”

“Yes sir I was given specific orders to start implementing gold crowns into circulation” Ewan said

“May I ask why mister Reid?” Khudel asked

“King Raynard himself has said that silver is losing it’s value, that it is too abundant in the kingdom” Ewan said

“What of the silver weapons the crownguard and magi use to combat against the dark creatures of the night?” Khudel asked

“I can not answer that sir, but it seems silver is on it’s way to be used as a reserve commodity. Even the soldier’s swords and arrowheads are being made from steel and iron” Ewan said

“It is as I have feared, if silver is phased out of the kingdom and away from the magi and crownguard the entire kingdom will be in danger. Silver is the only solid way to fight these night creatures without magic if we do not have that we will be doomed.” Khudel said

“I have thought for some time now there has been something nefarious going on, I wonder if it has anything to do with the silver. King Raynard must be listening to an outside source he is too smart for this he has battled monsters before.” Ewan said

“His new right hand I feel has been influencing him in many ways. We must tread lightly but I have a favor to ask of you” Khudel said

“If I am able I will help Master Khudel I have trusted you since my youth, what do you wish of me?” Ewan said

“I need at least 100 pieces of silver delivered to a magi I trust. If you can do more that would be superb but at least 100. Not at once but slowly put them away and when the time is right I will send you to the magi’s hidden residence. You will have to leave and never return so I know what I am asking you is big, but if what I think is happening really is we are in grave danger.” Khudel Said

“What exactly is happening Master Khudel?” Ewan said

“There is an old prophecy amongst the Magi generations old that says the day when silver and magic are outlawed the agents of the great demon lord will rise and usher in the end of existence” Khudel said

“Why would outlawing magic and silver help usher in a demon king?” Ewan asked

“Silver weapons will kill the demon king’s armies and magic strong enough and in the right hands will seal away the demon king forever in the beyond” Khudel said

“This Magi I am sending you to with the silver will keep it and use it to help prepare for the inevitable. Can I trust you Ewan Reid?” Khudel asked

“You can trust me, I will help you master any way I can” Ewan Said

The thought of that meeting with Master Khudel played in Ewan’s mind as he inched closer to the stables through the west wing. Ewan knew that Master Khudel was frightened and entrusted him with this delivery of silver to the mysterious Magi who would keep the ways of magic alive during what was possibly to come. Though he was unsure what exactly 120 pieces of silver would do to help a lone Magi Ewan learned not to question because the magi way was beyond his comprehension and they were always there to help the citizens of the kingdom. Ewan crept ever so slowly to the stable door cracking it open just enough to peek through and see if there were any guards watching. The coast was clear nothing but horses and not even a stable boy in sight, it was now or never. Ewan saddled a medium sized horse black in color hoping that would help him blend in with the night and miss some of the night creatures that may dare to attack him. Master Khudel instructed him to head west to the coast to the port town of Skela, from Skela Ewan would charter a ship to cross the sea to reach the far off land of Dormer on the other side of the world. Once on Dormer Ewan would have to make his way to Silver Mountain which is where the ancient Magi lives, he would stay and help him until the time was right to strike against the forces of the demon king.

The cold night wind pierced Ewan’s coat and was becoming unbearable, it had been ages since he was out at night outside the city walls, that was before the night creatures began to appear in the land. Ewan’s horse was beginning to be fatigued rather quickly and suddenly stopped in fear. Looking around for what the horse was afraid of Ewan saw nothing visible, his horse still neighed in fear. A set of red beady eyes appeared in front of the horse causing it to rear backward knocking Ewan and his drawstring sack off the saddle. The horse took off at a full gallop but that wasn’t enough, Ewan could see even in the darkness the horse was tackled by something. He could hear the painful screams in the distance of the horse almost as if it was begging for help. The red beady eyes that appeared in front of the horse were now on top of it making chomping sounds. Ewan’s only conclusion is that his horse was being eaten. He was afraid, beyond afraid and immediately looked for somewhere to hide. The forest was still a few clicks away and the lights of Bryalshire were fading in the background he needed to move and move quickly. At this point still in the fields he seen in the distance a light in the dark. It looked to be a farm on the outside of the forest. If he could make it there before being caught by the night creature with the red beady eyes maybe the farmer would be hospitable enough to let him stay until morning when it was safer to travel. Ewan knew he had to make a run for it, he grabbed the dagger from his sack and tied the sack behind his back, took a deep breath and made his move. Ewan Reid was on his way to what he hoped was safety.

The run was exhausting and the deep breaths hurt his lungs. The few clicks toward the light of the farmhouse felt like an eternity and Ewan could still hear his horse screaming behind him which meant whatever was eating it was still not aware of his escape or was too full to care to eat Ewan himself if that was even what the creature wanted. The light of the farmhouse grew closer and closer until Ewan came upon the fence outside the front entrance of the rectangular ranch house. Ewan collapsed out of breath hoping maybe the resident inside would come to his aid, but no one came.

The window shutters were closed, no glass just louvered wood with the orange glow of candle light seeping through. Ewan tried with all his might to muster up the words to yell for help but the exhaustion was too much, no sound came from his mouth. He was weak could barely stand but he used what strength he had left to raise himself up to his feet and began the walk through the fence to the front door to the ranch farmhouse. Still out of breath and exhausted Ewan could hear something behind him a few clicks away just a bit farther from where his horse was taken. The horse had gone silent now indicating that it finally had died and whatever creature had been eating it was now moving in the direction of him and the farmhouse. The fear overtook him as he frantically knocked on the farmhouse door. A voice from the inside yelled sounding rather elderly and angry "What do you want!!"

"Please sir I need help, something is after me" Ewan said

"Well that's what happens when you travel the lands at night, you have likely gained the attention of a Draugr. Leave here before you doom my farm as well" the old man said

"Sir please I beg of you I just need help until sunrise and I will be on my way, I will not bother you" Ewan said

"You are already bothering me be gone" the old man said

The sound of the creature was becoming more swift and it's footsteps were quicker, if Ewan were to convince the old man now would be the time, so he pulled out the only thing he had to barter with.

"Sir I have gold crowns, they were to buy my passage on a ship once I reach Skela but I will give them to you for stay here until sunrise. Please sir I am begging you if you have a heart please" Ewan said

The old man unlatched the lock and slowly opened the door, he was weathered a man who had looked to have lived 3 lifetimes. Long grey hair and a long grey beard, exhausted eyes and a look of distrust on his face. In his hand he had a shiny silver dagger at the ready should the young man at his door attack.

"I require no gold but if you are in danger I can not allow you to die" the old man said

"Come in quickly before the Draugr finds you here, I am too weak to fight it off and you have the look of someone who has never seen combat" The old man said

Ewan frantically entered the old man's farmhouse still exhausted from the long run, the old man closed the door, latched it and used his finger to make a motion on the door to Ewan looked like could have been a symbol.

The old man looked at Ewan and said "We will be ok, the old rune keeps Draugrs away from entering a home."

"A Rune?" Ewan asked

"Yes, the runes of the Norse people from Norsegaard work as protection symbols.....well some protection others can be dangerous." The old man said

"You're Norse then?" asked Ewan

"No, my wife was, she knew the runes well and taught them to me...at least the protection runes" the old man said

The old man motioned for Ewan to sit at his dining table as he went to the fireplace. The old man grabbed a cup and using a ladle poured a hot drink into the cup from a cauldron on the fire. The old man handed the full cup to Ewan. "Drink, it is tea it will warm you and reenergize your breathing" the old man said

"My name is Agrus" the old man said

"I am Ewan Reid" Ewan said

"What brings you out in the fields at night? It is quite dangerous even the Crownguard never ventures out here" Agrus said

"I am escaping Bryalshire..." Ewan said

"Escaping!?! You are a criminal?" Agrus said

"I have been falsely accused of thievery" Ewan quickly lied to Agrus

"Why would you run if it is false accusations?" Agrus asked

"I took something that was stolen from a Magi and now I am returning it to him" Ewan said

"So you did steal. No matter it is none of my concern drink your tea before it gets cold, it will help you recover" Agrus said

"It rightfully belongs to someone else and.."

"No matter, drink your tea. The reasons concern me not, a draugr was after you and you needed help" Agrus said

"You were going to leave me out there" Ewan said

"I had to make sure you were human and not a mimic. A mimic would never offer coin that is how I knew you were human and in need of help" Agrus said

"Mimics have made it into the fields? I thought they never ventured from the forest" Ewan said

"As you can see my farm is near the forest" Agrus said

Ewan drank the entire cup of tea and set the empty cup to the side. The fear had started to subside and a calm came over him for the first time since arriving to Agrus' farm. Ewan looked at the farmhouse noticing that everything seemed old, almost ancient. The cupboards were of a wood that looked so brittle and cracked, one cupboard door was open just a little that Ewan could see into. There was nothing but spider webs, not one dish, not one jar, nothing. That struck Ewan as odd especially in a farmhouse.

"How do you live here alone with attacks from Mimics and the threat of the Draugrs at night?" Ewan asked

"The runes protect my home and my crops, always have. I have nothing to fear." Agrus said

Ewan took another look around and noticed that the furniture looked worn and broken, as if it had not been used in a long time. The candlelight was low and flickered with the wind blowing in from the louvered shutters. With every flicker the light moved and shone on a previously darkened area of the farmhouse and revealed more dilapidation in the farmhouse, even the structure seemed in disrepair. To Ewan this old farmhouse had looked like it has not been used in generations and a feeling all too familiar to Ewan rushed over him, fear. Agrus sat across from Ewan staring blankly at him as he sat there not saying a word. Out of the silence Agrus finally started talking.

“Young man may I ask a favor of you? Could you go to the cupboard above the sink and fetch me my tankard? I wish to have some ale” Agrus said

“Yes sir of course I can” Ewan replied

Ewan arose from the table and felt a another feeling rush over him, not only was it fear but this time he felt dizzy. Ewan started to stumble as he walked toward the sink almost as if he had been feasting with the King on roast pig and Norse mead. Ewan brushed it off as exhaustion and continued forward but along the way noticed something else about the farmhouse. The wood was ashwood, the flickering candlelight revealed the dark reddish hue of the ashwood that comes when the wood has become so old and brittle it is ready to break down. Ashwood starts out as a cherry brown and will last for a minimum of one hundred years. After one hundred years the wood begins to rot and the cherry brown turns to a dull and dark red. Once the red starts it is only a short time, less than a year that the ashwood disintegrates. These walls and beams should have been replaced as soon as the red began to show, all farmers knew how to change the wood or to have a carpenter come and change it for them. Something was off and Ewan began to feel uneasy.

Ewan reached in the cupboard for Agrus’ tankard and brought it down still with an uneasy feeling in his stomach.

“Mister Agrus, what kind of crops do you grow here at your farm?” Ewan asked

“Wheat to make flour, several vegetables, my tea plants, just what I need to keep myself alive” Agrus said

“Where did you say you kept your garden?” Ewan asked

“It is right there behind the kitchen outside, you can see it clearly from the window above the sink” Agrus said

Agrus had never said where the garden was or even mentioned a garden he just said crops. Why would he not correct me Ewan thought to himself, his fear rising now. Ewan peeked outside the window above the sink, there was no garden just overgrown weeds. Ewan’s fear was overwhelming at this point he stood trembling with the tankard in hand and a slight dizziness began to take over.

“What’s the matter young man? Feeling a little off balance maybe?” Agrus asked

Agrus asked that question with a different voice than before, it wasn't gravelly or old, it was sinister and youthful. The dizziness became stronger and Ewan lost control of his limbs, the tankard fell to the ground and made an almost thunderous slam. Ewan looked toward Argus and watched as the man stood tall from the table with little effort. The old bearded face looked at Ewan as he fell helpless to the ground, his hand waved in front of his face and the visage of the old man was replaced by a youthful but frightening appearance. The face that now lay on Argus' head was pale white with bright red eyes, no pupils just solid red and bright. The red shone in the darkness brighter than even the candlelight. His dark black lips sneered in a devilish smile as he tossed back his long black wavy hair. Ewan was paralyzed on the floor but knew he was in a terrible situation.

"Your tea was good no?" the man said

"Forgive me for the kind old farmer guise I thought you would be more willing to drink the tea should my face be not as vampiric" the man said

"You're a Vampire!?" Ewan asked with a hint of fear

"Why yes, let me introduce my real self. I am Count Agrus Istvan of Bryalshire" Agrus said

"So your name IS Agrus?" Ewan asked

"It is I would not lie about my name, I am of nobility after all" Agrus said

"You're a monster!" Ewan exclaimed

"Hahahaha, well some may consider me so but I see my self as a sentient being just trying to survive" Agrus said

The terror overcame Ewan as he lie on the floor paralyzed fearing for his life. He did not know what plans this vampire had for him, and his name where had he heard that before? His thoughts raced trying to find any memory of the family name Istvan. Ewan had known so many of the noble families of Bryalshire doing his treasury work for King Raynard. While his thoughts raced he could start to feel his limbs again, the paralyzing effects of that tea were wearing off. He kept his movements small not to give Agrus any hint that he was regaining movement, that was when he remembered where he heard the name Istvan before. It was the name of an ancient noble family not seen in Bryalshire for generations. The story went that the Count and his family went missing without a trace after leaving for a vacation to the islands. They were on their way to Skela the port town to procure a ship to the islands, a popular vacation destination for the nobility. They left and were never heard from again, Skela harbormasters even reported they never arrived. If what this vampire is saying is true he is the missing Count from all those years ago. Not knowing what else to do Ewan reached quickly into his boot for the silver dagger he hid away, unsheathed it and threw it right into the thigh of Agrus.

Agrus let out a piercing howl as the silver blade penetrated his skin. Ewan knew this was his chance he rose to his feet with the effects of the tea wearing off, then jumped above the sink and vaulted out of the window of the dilapidated farmhouse. Ewan landed with a thud in the garden of weeds and rolled into some of the taller grass. Ewan looked around for something to use as a weapon and out of the corner of his eye he spots something he didn't expect, garlic.

It must have been a plant left over from the old farmers that kept growing for all these years. Ewan plucked the well hidden bulb and began to break it open to access the cloves. Agrus had managed to pull the blade from his thigh and screamed angrily. After throwing the blade to the fire of the fireplace he let out an angry grunt and puffed into a mist and disappeared. The mist puffed outside the kitchen window and Agrus reappeared with a more monstrous appearance.

“Oh mister Reid! That wasn’t very nice of you” Agrus said sarcastically

“Come back inside I promise you will be safe” Agrus yelled very menacingly

Ewan knew he was lying and continued to lay concealed in the garden waiting for Agrus to come near. Agrus began walking frantically toward where Ewan was laying, the anger clear on his now monstrous visage. Agrus stopped within a finger’s length of Ewan and began to yell.

“Why hide mister Reid? By now you know you can not escape, I will have my feeding” Agrus said

“Your horse was not as filling as I like, that is why you are on my menu now” Agrus said

The shocking revelation to Ewan angered him, this vampire Count Agrus Istvan had been the red beady eyes that chased him in the night. A mix of anger and fear swept over Ewan making him take a chance. He knew this may end his life but he had to do something, he did not want to die a coward at the hands of a vampire. Ewan took a clove of garlic in his hand, raised to his feet in front of Agrus, and before Agrus could react he smashed the clove of garlic in the Count’s eyes.

Agrus let out a painful howl holding his eyes. Ewan raised his fist and slammed it down onto the vampire’s head like a warhammer. Agrus fell to the ground still withering in pain from the garlic and let out another howl even louder than the last. Ewan ran to the fence post and ripped one of the pickets off of the garden fence, with the sharp end up he ran toward Agrus ready to jam it into his heart.

Agrus still in pain swiftly rose from the ground almost hovering and grabbed Ewan by the neck causing him to drop the fence picket. If what he had on his face before was anger this was rage. Holding Ewan by the neck and squeezing he hissed and showed his fangs.

“I was being gentle before and I would have made your death quick but now you pissed me off” Agrus said

Agrus opened his mouth ready to feed on Ewan’s neck, he brought him in closer to bite and Ewan closed his eyes preparing to pass into the beyond.

The sound of steel unsheathing rang in the night air and a swift swing of air rushed past Ewan as he fell to the ground. He then looked up confused as he saw a man fighting Agrus. The man was clothed in leather armor wielding a bright silver longsword. The silver shined bright in the moonlight and was at that moment the most beautiful sight Ewan had ever seen. Ewan watched as this armored man dodged a strike from Agrus’ clawed hand then kicked him in his elbow, the kick to the elbow caused Agrus to become disoriented. Agrus crouched over holding his elbow and as the man came closer extended his clawed hand swiping at him. The claw connected on the man’s leg but his razor sharp nails could not penetrate the leather armor. A burning sensation came over Agrus’ hand as his claw attempted to pierce the armor.

“Like that do you creature?” The man said

“What witchery is this?” Agrus asked

“Silver lined leather” The man said with a boast of confidence

“It’s you!” Agrus said with a realization of who this man was

“I’ve hunted you from all over Bryalshire, no more will you feed on the innocent. You vile creatures have seen the end of your existence in this realm, I will personally see to it you will never reach the Beyond”
The man said

“A time will come when you realize you need us vampires, a great calamity is coming and you have no idea hahaha. So continue to hunt us, you will have no allies in the coming calamity” Agrus said

“You have shed innocent blood and for that you will pay dearly” The man said

“Ha! They were cattle, every being has a right to feed. You feed upon the cows, pigs and goats of the realm, it is no different. Humans are our livestock, it is not personal it is survival” Agrus said

“Was it survival when you took a little girls life to feed your own!” The man said angrily

“Ah ha! Now it makes sense, you’re not hunting me for some vampire purge this is a personal vendetta.”
Agrus said

“She was my daughter! She was seven! She begged for her life! She was my daughter you fucking parasite!” The man screamed angrily

“Well if it is any consolation hunter, the fear made her taste exquisite.” Agrus said laughing

The rage built up inside the man, he could feel the ground shaking. Agrus noticed the man’s eyes had become a black and a red streak of light was coming from his hand. The man raised his hand with the streak of red light emanating, reached out and screamed. The red light streak shot forward and into Agrus’ chest, Agrus began to glow and writhe in pain. The pain was excruciating for Agrus he tried to let out a howl but no sound came. He could feel his self disintegrating and during this revelation he realized the man had casted a spell and this spell was intended to keep him from the Beyond. The Beyond is the spirit realm where all the dead can pass into, no matter your deeds you can enter the Beyond and exist even beyond death. Should a spell be cast from a magic user the spell can bind you into nothingness as you die, some would say that oblivion is a fate worse than death.

A calm came over the man as Agrus disintegrated into nothingness, though it would not bring his daughter back he felt solace in knowing that one day they would be reunited in the Beyond without the fear of Count Agrus Istvan finding them. The man made his way to over Ewan who was still processing the events that just transpired in front of him.

The man sheathed his sword came over to Ewan and extended his hand “I am here to help you, rise” the man said

Ewan took his hand and rose to meet him standing face to face. The man was of light complexion with long black hair and a full beard. He was tall way taller than most men, his muscles were toned as if he had been training for his whole life. Ewan grateful for the rescue of what would have been sure death hugged the man as tight as he could.

"It's over, Count Istvan is gone" the man said

"You knew him?" Ewan asked

"I have been hunting him for years" The Man said

"Hunting? What are you?" Ewan asked

"I am a Magi, a vampire hunting Magi to be specific. I trained as a Magi to find this bastard that took my daughter from me." The Man said

"I am sorry for your pain sir, I am glad you were here you saved my life" Ewan said

"My name is Cade, Cade Lewyn no need to call me sir I have not been Knighted" Cade said

"Well met Cade, I am Ewan Reid former treasury officer for King Raynard" Ewan said

"Former treasury officer?" Cade asked

"Yes it is a long story but I have been tasked by Master Khudel to deliver silver to this spot" Ewan said while pointing at the markings on his map

"Silver Mountain, Master Khudel is sending you there with silver?" Cade asked

"Yes he never explained why just that it was of the utmost importance that I deliver these silver pieces to the Magi who lives there." Ewan said

"I know of him, he is a legend among our ranks he is a silversmith, the only one known to me." Cade said

"Would you know what exactly he is to do with the silver pieces?" Ewan asked

"It is unknown to me, he is very secretive. Most do not even know his name, only the High Magi knows I believe. But if the High Magi is sending you to him it must be important. I can guide you, come with you, you obviously need the protection." Cade said smiling playfully

"I would gladly welcome the company Mister Lewyn" Ewan said

"Then let us depart, come I have a horse drawn carriage a few clicks away, we will make Skela in no time, then we can secure passage to the Overlands and make our way to Silver Mountain." Cade said

"An adventure it is then" Ewan said

"Aye, an adventure and perhaps on the way I can teach you to wield a long sword" Cade said playfully

"And perhaps I can teach you how to wield a garlic clove." Ewan said jokingly

"Hahaha! Yes I would do good to learn from Ewan Reid Vampire hunter." Cade laughed

The two men boarded the carriage to the port town of Skela, not knowing what lie ahead or what future is in store for them the two men were ready to accept the fate that awaited them. History would look kind on Ewan and Cade but that is a story for another time.