

Where The Draggletail Grows Thick

By Daniel Berryman/QuickChangeArtist

There was talk of either spectres or witchcraft, out on the floodland south of town. There usually was. The damp places between Seyda Neen and Balmora had always drawn eerie superstitions: tales of ghostly light in the nighttime fog and of the haunting cries of hanging, self-slain mer, eerie faces in the moonlight and strange noises to curdle the blood, malignant histories buried with the bones that the rivers sometimes pulled free from the mud.

It would seem a nonsensical kind of horror. How could Dunmer, a people whose culture held their ghosts so beloved, ever hold such silly terror over talk of spirits in the southwoods?

Easily, it turns out.

The swamps were where strange things danced and howled, where unmourned and untended souls wandered: mad with despair or rage, or the ministrations of witches. The spirits set upon the living like ravenous kagouti, it was said, tearing out the warmth felt owed to them. Other times, a wraith would lock its glowing eyes with a living mer and, thus invited, follow them to their home to whisper into their ears as they slept. You kept your eyes down if you had to walk outside the city walls at night, or else a weeping spirit might come to leave you aching with unnamed sorrows, a deep lethargy and a monstrous, inconsolable longing for the swamps: for a deep pond to swim in and a heavy stone to hold, for the crooked limbs of a gallows-oak to sway from, for lightless holes in the earth as welcoming as a mother's arms. The common wisdom says that coda flowers bloom only where a suicide has fallen, and it is not called the Bitter Coast for nothing.

Dunmeri couriers and merchants would often wholeheartedly refuse to travel through the wooded swamplands and deeper hills at night, no matter how well they were paid or how harshly they were threatened. Travelling adventurers, being entirely without sense, often scoffed at the local warnings and set off in the late evening, only to return pallid and shivering by midnight, rambling about wild drumming and shrieking they'd heard in the wet-woods. There were always the ones that did not return at all, which only fed the many stories all the more, and set the local mer to knowing looks and fretful tsk-ing.

A governor's son had been the last to vanish. That morning, a guard had found what was left of him in the river, barely more than blue rags and bones. A few said he had been taken by slaughterfish, gnawed clean in the night, but most knew better. The governor had not spoken a single word since, something the good folk of the city crooned a tragedy; only in private, hissing over cheap flin, would they admit that they were glad for the quiet. Some were even taking bets on how long the governor would last.

Moraelyn had barely spoken, either, though no one really noticed with all the drama and whispers surrounding this latest tragedy. His brother Drerrin had queried why he had been

spending so much more time in his room than usual, but had not pressed for much more than a weak claim of ill health. Drerrin knew when not to ask questions. He was grateful for that.

He checked his reflection in the window-glass. He did look rather drawn. Maybe he was sick, after all. He still felt the cold, wet press of flesh against him in the dark, the mud on his skin. He shouldn't have been out there...

He'd been fishing with some friends, that was all. The others had all turned back for home when the crickets had started to sing, but he'd wanted to stay behind a little longer, just to check the crayfish traps. The deep mud had sucked him down at every step, the lengthening shadows turning him all about, and before he knew it, the sun had dipped below the treeline and the fog had started to roll in. He'd lit a lantern he'd found hanging from a tree branch— only for a second, he was only looking around to see which way the path was, he was going to put it right back where he found it— and he'd seen them.

Ghost-lights, pale orange and green, all along the water a little ways from him, just far enough to only see colour against the black. There were so many. Dozens, easily. From the stories, he'd always assumed they were rare things, and rare things were almost never in big groups or they stopped being rare at all. They shone with an odd, sickly shimmer, just slivers of burning colour in the dark, casting no light of their own.

He'd known that he mustn't look too hard at strange things in the swamp but he froze, and no matter how his mind screamed at him, he could not make himself move. His legs were sunk half to the knees in the cold, black mud, his arm still stupidly holding up the lantern he'd found as though a little candleflame might cast enough light to protect him. The crickets screamed all around him, a numbing drone that made it all feel less than real, and he just couldn't stop staring...

Then he watched as two of the lights rose from the water, and slowly turned towards him. Then two more. And two more.

He'd looked down immediately, clutched the lantern to his chest to keep the light as close to his heart as he could. Stumbling prayers tumbled from his clumsy mouth, as many as he could think of, begging gods and saints and a dozen half-known grandfathers to keep him safe. There were sloshing, heavy strides heading towards him in the dark and the mire; his guts turned to icewater. He'd stared hard into the lantern until the candlelight had scalded the sight from his eyes, hoping that the blind, even just temporarily-so, might be exempt from the attentions of things in the swamps.

A hand had reached into his tiny circle of light, smeared in clay and something stickier, blacker than clay, shreds of blue cloth clinging around its wrist like riverweed. He'd closed his eyes tight and wept, sobbing that he was sorry, that he hadn't meant to be here so long, that he didn't mean to take their lantern, and that he'd put it back if they just let him go home and didn't make

him drown himself in the mud.

Things touched him, held his shoulders, pushed him this way and that. He'd stumbled in the waters, trying to go where he was told without opening his eyes— that was surely the trick, after all, and besides he hadn't wanted to see what was touching him with such cold, slimy-wet hands. He'd tried not to whimper too much in case it annoyed them, even though there wasn't much he could have done to stop.

All at once, it seemed, everything had let him go. There were noises he did not understand all around him, too close by to dare open his eyes: horrible, guttural sounds, like stones and raw offal tumbled together in a barrel. Then it had just been his own heavy, hiccuping breath and the crickets. He must have stood there in silence for a dozen minutes, still clutching the lantern to his chest, before he realised he wasn't standing in water anymore.

"Are you lost, child?"

A voice had come from further ahead, the rasped, polite cadence of an Argonian startling him more than any monster's snarl might have done at that moment. He'd kept his eyes and mouth shut and nodded, trying not to tremble too badly.

"Come this way. The road isn't far. Can you walk?"

He'd gulped down a sob and nodded again, mutely holding out a hand towards the voice. Dry, smooth skin had wrapped around it gently, leading him from mud to pebbles to smooth-packed dirt. "There, there," that comfortingly-flat voice had said to him. "Do not cry. Do not be scared, now."

Moraelyn had opened his eyes, looking down at the lantern he'd still held. He'd tried to tell the Argonian stranger that the lantern wasn't his, that he needed to throw it back into the swamp probably, although he was shivering so badly that the words came out jumbled and half-drowned. He'd stopped when he saw a blue rag just slipping out from under the cuff of the Argonian's sleeve. It was still wet from the swampwater, soaking little dark patches into the Argonian's workshirt. In the glass of the lantern, tilted in just the right way, he'd seen the stranger's reflection, and the two glowing points of orange light where the eyes should have been.

He'd dropped the lantern and run as fast as he'd been able, until his lungs tore themselves ragged on his ribs and his breath came like fire, until the sweat had half-washed the mud from his skin. And then he kept running, until the fog rolled back into the hills and the sweet, sensible waters of the Odai called him home.

It was only once he'd made it back to Balmora, tearstained and filthy, exhausted in the dirt beside the silt-strider tower for his father to find, that he had realised he'd left the damned

crayfish nets behind.

He caught all manner of trouble for that. They were his father's nets.