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# Seek the Monster

By Mab Morris

## **The Last Hours at the Iron City**

Halsmuddhet, the shaman, began to wish he'd never returned to the world. He followed the war chief Codhu through the pale stone hallways, past bodies and gore. Enemies and countrymen alike were dying or dead in the keep of the Iron City, Kliderhamerdon. The pale walls, with flecks of red ore gleaming through the stone, were now splattered with blood. Codhu had gone unerringly to the main hall, and stopped short in the entryway, arms akimbo.

Halsmuddhet nearly bumped into him. Codhu looked for his sister among the carpet of corpses.

Halsmuddhet also looked in the tangle of limbs that stank sharply of urine, feces, and blood. He was not sure what he wanted to find, but he knew there had to be something for a shaman to find. The halls were mostly silent, except for Codhu's men looking for survivors in other parts of the keep. Not even flies had come. Halsmuddhet did not know if their absence was noted by the other soldiers, but he knew it must contribute to their sense fear, as they surely were familiar with the stages of decomposition after death during battle. No one spoke. He saw the pale, rounded head of a baby. It was Codhu's baby nephew. The bundle moved. He slid past the war chief and picked the boy up out of sodden, filthy cloths. He was sure the child must be injured, but to his surprise he was unmarked, if filthy. The child was wide-eyed and silent.

Halsmuddhet sensed something beyond the absence of flies, or rats, or even the caw of crows outside. These had been cause enough to trouble him, and anyone else who had

experience with death and war. This? It was something only a shaman could perceive. And it shook him to his core. He wondered if this was the reason he had been sent back into the world.

“Ahnya!” Codhu cried. “Ahnya!” The big man stumbled past a severed limb and a body, and lifted his sister up. She was still clutching a long knife in her hand.

“We killed them all,” she said.

Halsmuddhet recognized the disorientation in her eyes. She tried, but could not focus on her brother. Her head swiveled, trying to locate his face as he murmured, “Ahnya.”

Halsmuddhet stepped closer. The pupils of her eyes were the same size, and there was no wound on her head. He looked deeper with his second sight, and grew cold. Her disorientation went beyond normal possession. He would have trembled then, if he weren’t already in shock with what he’d found with the baby. Something other than a demon had possessed her, and had acted. Halsmuddhet had lived a long time, and seen more than all his shaman brothers and countrymen put together. He’d been taught by two he was sure were no longer shamans, but more—demi-gods, he believed. Never in his experience, even in war, had the death of humans removed their attendant demons. He knew that even he, one of the greatest shamans that had ever lived could not do it. But: They had *killed* them all? Halsmuddhet and Codhu looked around in disbelief.

Halsmuddhet could easily see the disbelief that furrowed Codhu’s brow, as he looked at the bloody long knife in his sister’s hand, and the pile of bodies around her. On their way to the castle to catch up with the invading army, Codhu had claimed the Lady Ahnya had been entirely domestic all her life. “She’d cooked her first fish at three, and wove a tapestry at five. The only time that girl held a knife was to scale a trout.” Codhu had raced here because of it. But it was more than just his sister’s domesticity that made him hurry. An accident, when his horse had fallen down a treacherous part of a mountain trail, had left her husband a cripple. The Lord

Klider walked with crutches, and mostly sat at a table and gave orders to run his domain. Being the heredity lord of an iron country, he knew much of the secret smithy craft. He wasn't weak. After the fall he still found a way to pound hot iron to forge a new sword. But still, neither Ahnya nor Klider could have defended the keep against the hoard themselves. Yet, by her words, they apparently had.

Halsmuddhet could see the rising hysteria in the strong man's blue eyes. *They killed all the enemy?* Codhu clearly thought. Halsmuddhet was equally troubled, and only a cry from the child made him realize he was squeezing too hard. His own thought was, *They killed all the demons?* And that was impossible. Yet, he could sense no demons in the room, except the ones they had brought.

Ahnya couldn't have done it. No person he knew could have done it. Even he could not do it, though he had gone beyond the skills of a shaman, and could shape natural and spiritual forces. He could stop demons, like any good Seeker could, but even he could not destroy them. They were hardly half in this world. Despite all that he could see, sense... and in this case more importantly did not sense. He did not know what to think. They were dead. And that seemed so unlikely.

The child cried out again, louder. Halsmuddhet forced himself to relax.

"Codhu," Ahnya said. She struggled weakly in her brother's arms. "My child."

Codhu tried to find a way to reach Halsmuddhet through the gore. It was worse in this room than any other—as if the entire enemy army had fought a cripple and a woman and had still lost. Codhu started to step over a body, trying not to slip on blood that was still slick as well as sticky.

"Codhu," she said again.

“Yes?”

“His name is Hero.”

Codhu stepped over a few bodies, nearly slid when his foot stepped on cloth that hid a bloody wrist. Halsmuddhet reached out a hand to steady him. “Hero and what else?” he asked.

Codhu nodded to Halsmuddhet. “The shaman here can make up his charm, so the demons will not torment him.”

Halsmuddhet lifted the baby towards Ahnya and Codhu. The demons Codhu carried with him acted as if the baby did not exist. They did not reach out to plague him, jealous of such a proud name like ‘Hero.’ He realized that his own demons were also ignoring the child. With all that had happened here, with as many people who had lived and died here, there should have been far more demons around to either plague or inspire still present. The demons Codhu, and he carried did not only ignore the child, they seemed to have shrunk into themselves, like children seeing their parents come to blows, or their friends being beaten by their father over some trifling matter.

Halsmuddhet tried not to tremble as he showed the baby to his mother, because there were, already, no demons to torment the boy.

“Ahnya,” Codhu said, “What’s the child’s full name?” The pain in the man’s voice rang out into the room, and even the demons seemed stilled as if waiting with bated breath for the answer.

“Just Hero,” she said.

“Ahnya, you can’t,” Codhu said. “The Demons will get him. It’s too proud a name. No charm will ever be strong enough to protect him!”

Ahnya laughed. To Halsmuddhet it rang sharp and hollow, echoing throughout the vast universe, and clanging against the blood splattered walls of the iron keep. “We killed them all,” she said.

Her eyes were on her son. And then slowly the strangeness in her pale face revealed itself as she relaxed. Both men recognized the oddness just as it was leaving her face to be replaced by soft, maternal love. Even Codhu looked around as if he could see the demon leaving her. Halsmuddhet watched the demons relax. And then she drifted away.

“Can you heal her?” Codhu asked Halsmuddhet, looking around for a place he could put her that wasn’t covered or soaked in blood. He did not see any.

“No. She’s dying.” He nodded to the blood still dripping from the cut in her side.

She did not die right away. But it did not matter. Codhu had seen enough death that it didn’t matter to him when he left her. They found Klider, covered in slashed bed hangings behind his court table. Codhu laid Ahnya next to her husband, who also clung to a thin thread of life. If Ahnya wasn’t dead before he left, Codhu saw no reason to waste time in holding her hand till she or her husband were cold. Halsmuddhet was too shaken to protest. He carried the child out of the room, out of the keep, out of the dead man’s domain. He wanted to escape the place as quickly as Codhu.

Codhu and Halsmuddhet salvaged the sword and long knife that Hero’s parents had used, so they could give them to Hero when he was old enough to carry them. Neither man had to say anything. Worked iron was incredibly valuable, for plows, axes, and even weapons, but it was unlikely that anyone would come back to this iron keep any time soon, and it would be some time before Hero could inherit all that his father had created. Kliderhamerdon was valuable property for the kingdom, being rich with iron ore, and not dependent on what could be dredged

from a bog. But to a man, everyone was ready to leave the iron keep as quickly as they could. Not one wanted to linger, and few soldiers scavenged for what weapons they could find. Despite a tradition of scavenging wealth or weapons, most soldiers left everything where it lay.

They practically ran out of the castle with few hereditary possessions for the boy except weapons and a name. Though most of the city had not survived, and a sizeable portion of the invading army had died here, there were surely more enemy to pursue and exterminate from the country—if they weren't already running, screaming, for their boats or the hills. Codhu and his army chased them, as if the dead's demons inspired them. Only Halsmuddhet knew the demons were dead.

As soon as he could, Halsmuddhet washed the baby, and wrapped him in clean cloths. He felt no compunction in burning the blood soaked winding cloths they'd found him in—expensive rich colors of red and blue embroidered on linen so fine it resembled the silk he'd seen far to the south in countries his people did not even know existed. He could not keep it, despite the workmanship and care his mother had given. Hero had been bundled in cloth now stained in blood and brain matter. Halsmuddhet thought the poor child had already inherited every means of disaster from an abandoned bloodstained keep to a dangerous name; he did not need to be continually wrapped in the memories of it. From rich embroidered cloth to plain much washed and patched linen he went.

Since he'd returned to the world, and found that his coveted position and title of royal shaman was no longer needed, he had devolved from wandering shaman and mystic to a soldier and healer. He had not been bad in either role, but it had left him with little challenge. With Hero in his charge, he now devolved into something else: a nursemaid. He had no one to ask for help. The camp followers were largely in exactly the same position as they would have been had

they been captured by invaders. Their troubles, and the shaky peace they'd made with it, made them even more incapable than he was. Halsmuddhet tended the baby for more than just compassion.

Moments after finding the love of his life, he'd left her to pursue knowledge far beyond all he could imagine. He'd abandoned the prestige of being the King's advisor and shaman. He'd left this world, this land, to study the mysteries of the universe. When he looked at the child, each new day, there were still no demons near him. It troubled his soul—as if there were things he had not been taught. He'd sacrificed so much, and gained so much knowledge, but for what? Still more questions? He'd traveled along spirit and natural paths with demi-gods. He had never seen a child without demons of either good or ill.

Unwilling to let go of this curiosity, he did what he could for the child. He did so with little knowledge of babies and boys, and while coping with the aftermath of a long war. It had started before he'd left. Since he'd abandoned love and his king, King Darmen had lost his life, and his nephew Sahl—who had been Halsmuddhet's former colleague—had become king. Once as a shaman, now a king, Sahl had to contest with the invaders from the west trying to gain ground. Their last great push ended with the massacre at Kliderhamerdon. He knew that not just Klider's land, but the whole of Ismerin was altered. Both land and the spirits of the people were already marked for generations to come. Even Hero was not spared. He was merely spared demon influence.

Halsmuddhet helped to raise Hero from baby to boy, and was astonished to discover that Codhu planned that his orphan nephew would become a Seeker. Even King Sahl, greedy for the power of exports, was reluctant to demand Hero return to his land and mine. He did not want cursed iron. It made the boy titled, but penniless. A Seeker was as good a role as any. Codhu



could not believe Hero was so different as the shaman made him out to be, especially as the boy was equally mischievous as his cousins. Halsmuddhet had made their charms to minimize demon influence in promoting their behavior, and so did not argue. He could either claim he was a fraud, blind, or incapable. How to say that boys are naturally mischievous, with or without demons prodding them along to worse, even dangerous excess?

Halsmuddhet had too much pride to ever hint at such a thing. He merely glowered at the demons that had helped inspire their last escapade, knowing that others had prevented it from being far worse. The demons chortled and laughed and skittered away for the time being. Halsmuddhet was left to study Hero's natural mischievousness, and despair of ever finding the answers he needed. No matter how hard he looked into the other world, he could not see any demons around him.

As far as Hero becoming a Seeker, he would not be the only one who needed to study lists and learned rules for their job. More than one Seeker had little second sight to aid them. Even those men lived in both the world and the world beyond the trees—something his demi-god teachers called *ihyel* and *vhagas*, and had taught Halsmuddhet to live in both or either. Hero lived only in what his teacher called the *ihyel*. He would never experience the thrill or chill of demon taunt, curse or inspiration.

None of those things mattered. Even Halsmuddhet could agree that Seeker was far better a role than priest, and that he could not take the position earmarked for his cousins that might suit his status. He did not like it. But Seeker the boy would become.

There had been Seekers long before the wars, but King Sahl had removed their direct power; he'd given more authority to priests and chieftains, giving them the right to call out for Seekers to come and remove demons, or demon-tainted men. Halsmuddhet could see the good

of that choice: People had seen far too much brutality during the war—nothing like Kliderhamerdon, but enough to give nightmares across the land. With more wisdom than Halsmuddhet would have once credited Sahl with, the shift in authority removed what could look like random brutality in a country that had seen far too much of it. Seekers could no longer kill people they claimed were demon possessed—prior proof had to be established. As a tenant of faith, it had something to recommend it: It allowed humans to forgive each other, often at the cost of death, a lost finger, hand, or other parts, and shoved the full blame on unseen creatures that were not exactly blameless in those matters.

Policing of the country of headstrong people through chieftains and priests while still using Seekers, it had a lot to recommend it. As a deterrent against Demons? Halsmuddhet knew it a useless activity. Demons could influence quite a lot of evil in humans—and great good, too—but humans could not kill them. Remove them from their object; prevent them from infecting the same village: yes. But kill them? No. It was why the massacre bothered Halsmuddhet like no other thing, and made Hero even more precious to his eyes.

For years Halsmuddhet tried to use his arts to “see” what had happened when Ahnya had taken up the long knife, or Klider his sword. He couldn't. The closest he came was listening to, or peeking into the growing boy's nightmares. Long before he could articulate, or know the meaning of words beyond the simplest, the fact that the child apparently remembered what had happened surprised the shaman. He tried to see Hero's future, but was forced to wait for answers. It was, like the massacre, beyond his ability to see. Even before he'd left the world to study beyond what he'd known as a king's shaman, he should have been able to envision one boy's past. Now? It should have been even easier. His insight into Hero's future should have been easy as well. All he knew was that something worse than a demon would challenge the

baby he raised to a man. He was certain that whatever came to Hero, he would need the greatest shaman in the world to save the day.

## **Strange Death at the Edge of the Cursed Land**

Hero leaned against the carved doorframe of a small house, trembling but still trying to be stoic about the body inside. He clutched the rough symbol against evil, hoping it would prevent the evil of losing his lunch. There had been quite enough death in his life, already, some of it by his own hands as a Seeker killing men to kill the demons that possessed them—all the rest in nightmares. But this one was bad. He shivered, and knew it was not the freezing temperatures, but his body about to vomit. He leaned down, not quite putting his head between his knees. His horse, Steed, snorted steam into the cold air, and shook his head. His talismans clanged against his costume. When Hero did not move or respond, Steed nickered at him, stomped his hooves, and stepped forward as if worried.

Hero said, “I’ll be okay.”

After a few deep breaths he felt ready to stand up again. A few more, he could go back inside to try and figure out which of the bodies this might be.

He assumed it was Faulen, the iron-smelter’s wife, but could not be sure. The person’s hair had been raggedly cut. By all accounts the woman had been known for her hair, but this was short like a boy’s. Amid the blackened, torn gore, Hero made out a soft curve where one might reasonably be on a woman. He assumed it was the remains of a breast below what remained of a neck. That complicated bit of gore between the legs looked as if it had been

female parts chewed off, rather than male. He didn't like associating that anatomy with words like chewed, torn, or hacked off, though he couldn't imagine any terms of incising that made him any happier.

He'd seen damage like this—on deer for the most part, and mostly in less decomposed states. If she had been outside, Hero would have said a wolf had attacked Faulen's naked body. A body naked in winter, even indoors, was odd. But the same parts that wolves liked to attack were savaged here. What wolf went inside a building? Still, Faulen had been torn up. If it was her.

Hero sighed. If it was her—then her husband Haidez was the one burnt in his own iron smelting oven.

Hero wouldn't have known about it, till he came all the way up here on his usual rounds when Spring deigned to venture and made travel easier. But a tinker, who travelled up and down all of Codhu's domain, had come up during a break in the weather to get iron from the smelter and found death. He'd grabbed what iron he could easily lay his hands on, and fled. He informed the first Seeker he met: Hero.

Hero couldn't really blame the tinker for not wanting to touch the bodies. They couldn't have been in a very good state even a couple of days back. Still, grabbing all the iron ore he could easily lay his hands on smacked of greed, and that was a bad sign—the type Hero was supposed to look for. But Hero had reasoned that that sign was a little late. Greed, among other bad habits, was a sign a Seeker was supposed to look for so death like this *didn't* happen. It couldn't possibly point to a cause in *this* case, as the tinker had hailed him and told him what he knew. Demon-possessed bent on mischief or evil never willingly attracted a Seeker's attention.

Looking at what must be Faulen's body, he didn't blame the man for getting what he could, and running... as fast as an iron laden cart could go. Even without the gory deaths, the hut was on the very edge of the "ghost land"—Kluderhamerdon.

"You should not have moved here," Hero said to the body.

Hero felt the need to go back out into the cold, again. He decided to examine the other body.

There was a small smelting oven on the outside of the house, which would help heat the home along with Faulen's baking ovens. Haidez was rather clever when he'd built the house. In the colder reaches of the country, he could keep his wife in comfort while she tended to her daily chores. He had used the autumn to gather up all the red earth, and a good deal of firewood, all ready for smelting, so he could keep at it during the depths of winter, a little at a time, and have the opportunity for riches in spring. Hero could see that it had been used. But that was not where the other body was.

The main, larger stone iron smelting oven was built into a hill nearby. It was burnt, cracking some of the stones from the heat. Considering the heat needed to smelt iron earth, it told Hero a great deal about how hot that fire had gotten. He was grateful for the snow that hid the greasy soot that must have rained down from the rising smoke. The direction of the wind was possibly the only thing that saved the house's thatch from burning. It looked like what was left of the body was stuffed into the top of the smelting oven, feet first. Or as if Haidez had fallen in and tried to climb out as he burned. His head rested on the hillside, one charred hand remaining intact. Though the scene did not look restful. It looked as if both arms were curled, as if he'd been preparing to fight, leaving one hand hooked over the top of the short chimney, the other inside, black and fractured with heat.

Hero assumed it was Haidez. It was hard to tell. The body was burnt beyond recognition from the heat of the oven, with only one arm remaining relatively intact and a skull cracked by either a blow, heat, or both. The lower parts of the body's bones were burnt clean and mostly fragile and fractured. Snow touched much of what remained, covering the blackened remains and stove with a thin crystalline sheen.

Hero knew just enough about the process of smelting to look into the lower openings and see that there was both iron and slag at the bottom. Hero doubted anyone would ever retrieve it. Burnt bits of bone mingled with ore.

He could see nothing identifiable. He would have to rely on what he knew of the other body inside the house, not that he could identify that body with any assurance either. The house surely had been warm when she died, and surely the heat of decomposition would have delayed the freezing of her body as winter settled into the house without life and living to warm it. Hero could only make guesses as to the process with the knowledge he did have, along with logic.

He'd come across carcasses of animals in the north, during winter. They tended to be in reasonable states of preservation, till thaw. Thus, the house must have been warm, or he'd have had a far more identifiable body than he was left with.

With the short hair of the house victim, Faulen could be alive somewhere. He'd have to ask around. The area was so remote, that it would take him two days to ride to the nearest outlaw home, though there were no outlaw families within a day's walking distance. Neither Haidez nor Faulen would be aware of those particular neighbors, he was sure. He knew these outlaws were not violent, which is why he'd let them live. The closest town was even further, and the couple would know of it, and trade there, weather permitting. Up here, it often didn't in winter, but Hero knew that there had been a couple of weeks of comparatively fair weather.

They could have gone to town, just as easily as the tinker had come up for ore to sell to some smithy in the south.

Hero didn't know much about the iron smelters. While important, they were near the bottom of the food chain for things like tools, stirrups, and swords. Smelters made raw ore useful. The iron-mongers or tinkers carried the iron sponge or iron bars to the smithies who made weapons and, more importantly, tools for farmers like hoes, and axes, and tillers. Iron bars were also useful trade items. The king considered it one of the country's most valued exports besides timber. Smiths couldn't get workable iron except for people like Haidez who would work raw ore into something useable. It had been madness to winter up here, away from the safety and comfort of a village, as well as being so close to the cursed lands of Hero's birth. Hero could not deny it, but it would have been profitable for Haidez if he'd not died. Kliderhamerdon had been valuable iron country, and some of that wealth could be found in the northernmost regions of Codhu's purview.

After the massacre, there were few smelters brave enough to live this close to that domain to do the hard work that made the red earth useable—even if iron was iron, and it lay on the ground. In bog country, far to the south, it was sometimes useful to toss a man into a bog as a sacrifice, begging the bogs to give up the blood of the earth so they could use it. Despite that type of ritual, even the king—and most of his people—thought too much blood had been shed in the ghost country to make for good iron. They feared it was too cursed. Even Hero's own uncle Codhu had not stopped to bury his sister, and had left her dying next to her husband.

Hero knew that this house wasn't on *that* land, but his uncle's. It was more than two days hard ride from his father's empty castle. He was no shaman, and certainly not one of the best Seekers of his craft, having to do everything by well-rehearsed lists and memorization. He knew



he wasn't alone in this, but more than once, he'd seen others feel, at the very least, a sense of dread, or the hairs on their arms lift, when his didn't. He didn't think the curse extended this far south. Anyone who could have sensed it had not told him differently.

He could not bear to leave these bodies the way his mother and father, and countless others had been left.

"I'm not one to sense demons or curses," he said. "I'll just have to take my chances." He thought about the body inside the house, and about what he knew he must do. He took a deep breath. "If I vomit, I'll eat again one day."

Using parts of thatch for tinder, and a good portion of the wood Haidez had laid up for the winter, Hero lit a fire to help soften the ground. Since all he could do was sit and wait for the fire to burn down, he cooked some rabbits he'd caught in the morning, and thought about what he'd seen here.

With deep winter isolation, cabin fever was a real possibility. At times it could be dangerous, but this would have been the worst case he'd seen if that was the cause. He knew of people running out into the deep nights of "day" and die, either by falling down frozen cliffs, or getting lost and freezing to death. Murder had been done, of course, but rarely so gruesome. Most often the results of Cabin Fever's mischievous demons were inappropriate relations adding to the crop of babies the following fall.

When the fire died down, Hero used Haidez and Faulen's precious gardening tools—ones that even the greedy tinker didn't take. Misusing the ax, he chopped up the earth, and then shoveled out as large a hole as he could manage. This far north, he could have considered an air burial, but what carrion birds were around hadn't touched Haidez, and Faulen's body was far too decomposed to be considered a meal, even for them. Burial was his only choice. Not a lovely

task carrying the brittle burnt corpse, having to pick up what bits he could find when they fell off. His fingers stung with the frozen bits of burnt bone, but he gathered what he could. For the other body he started to use the old mattress to drag the bloated body outside, and discovered that part of the body had been tied to the frame.

He did throw up then, and dry-heaved even more as his mind attempted to wrap itself around the implications. Trying to steady himself, Hero forced himself to not think about them till afterwards. Slowly, he finished the task, covering the two bodies up with dirt and then stone from the cracked smelting oven as well. Feeling queasy, and in a bit of a frenzy, despite having no sense of their power except habit, he also gathered up whatever talismans he could find, and even took a couple off Steed's costume for good measure. He added those among the rocks covering the grave.

Like a bog sacrifice, he said some words in hopes the land would return the favor, but more, because he desperately wanted peace for the two who had died so violently.

It wasn't much. He could not tell if what he had done was more than respect and kindness. He wished he could do more. All he could do was think, and try to understand. Cabin fever was a common threat in winter, and so were a good number of those out of law.

Being cast out of law was more than a threat to any individual, especially in the north—it could easily mean death from exposure and starvation. Villagers hunkered down together in winter, told stories, carved wood, wove blankets, and made things like clothes, tables, and babies. Unless you were well prepared, like Haidez and Faulen seemed to have been, you did not want to be cast out of even the smallest village. The couple's stores of food were proof they could have lasted till late spring. Faulen, pretty hair or not, was known to make a feast with an ounce of porridge. There were many outlaws who had not survived their first winter because

they lacked the support of a community. Hero had given them air burials, or buried them himself—glad to let winter do his work for him if he'd been asked to hunt them down. Outlaws were often desperate enough to steal or do violence. The ones Hero knew who lived nearby were odd, surely, but not thieves, or violent. He could not believe it was any of them so demon possessed as to do this violence. Besides, all the incredibly valuable food and tools were still in the house.

Even for an iron smelter like Haidez, knowing that his wealth was easy enough to dig up where the earth was red: it had been a risk to come out here. There were dangers besides cold, like outlaws, and wild board, and bears. None of those things had happened to those two: Something stranger than mere murder had happened to Haidez and Faulen. It was Hero's duty to figure out what it was, if he could. Since a demon surely had been involved, it was his job to make sure the demon wasn't causing harm to surrounding villagers. His purview included the wild country in the north of Meyrin, his uncle's domain. That included the outlaws who lived in it, even those who did not have a price on their head. The villagers came first.

Hero helped himself to some of the food stores—including the grain stored for the livestock that was clearly long gone. Hero realized that if a wolf had somehow attacked a bound Faulen, it hadn't killed the livestock, unless they were somewhere under the snow. It was something to consider. He thought some more, and tied the iron tools to Steed's saddle bags—including the ones that didn't actually look like saddle bags. He was increasingly glad he'd gathered up all the loose talismans he could find and added them to the stone pile covering up the bodies.

“Please be at rest, and do not curse the land,” he said, again, looking at the pitiful mound.

He fingered one of the talismans hanging from Steed's bridle. It was a small thing, a roughly carved wooden square with a rune. The cord was braided with some hair from Steed's fetlocks. It had been a gift from a little girl he'd once protected from harm. She had told him it was to bring luck to his travels. It had also been one of the rare times someone had looked at him with genuine gladness. He didn't feel any frisson of magic. But the memory gave him some heart, even as he mourned he hadn't been able to help the two under the talismans and stones. He waited to see if he would sense anything, but nothing came.

He got on his horse, and focused on the ride, and not the horror and gore. At the nearest village of Khasihimi, all was serene, and there was no sign of a living Faulen. Everyone assumed the couple were still home practicing the art of baby-making. Loath to spread unnecessary fear, but wanting there to be some awareness of the truth, Hero privately told the village priests and headman the basics of what he'd found. They were shocked to hear of the deaths, and promised to keep an eye out for strange demon activity, and to let him know as quickly as they could. He gave them a somewhat vague itinerary of his still un-planned travels. Further questions revealed that there were no missing village boys, or boys who had gone to work with Haidez. There *had* been cabin fever, but, as the local priest stated, "All it means this time is that we'll have a few more babies this fall than were expected, who we'll love no matter who the fathers are."

Hero policed the rest of the wild country of his uncle's domain, hoping to hear of anything even slightly demonic. But the landscape was for the most part placid. The headman at Thincoton had asked him to come back in a month or two, as something might be brewing that might require Hero to do a bit more looming. Both knew that often his mere presence was a good reminder to behave. While he did more looming than lopping off fingers, hands, or feet—

or other bits—his reputation was such that few had doubts he'd hesitate to do so. Looming did not solve any past crimes; in more remote villages his role was such s kept people from talking to him; but he often prevented repetitions. He was observant enough, despite whatever the headman told him, to loom in the right quarter with all the weight of his role, his past, and his legendary history. But people in the north tended to need their neighbors in the more lush south. Hero did not have to loom often, and maimed and killed even less. For which he was grateful. He had done quite enough of the latter to last him a lifetime. He remembered, in his dreams, far more.

Most of the time he lived by hunting, fishing, and trading on either his name with legitimate villagers, or the few outlawed families who eked out a living in the wilder parts of the north. He wouldn't necessarily call the outlaws good people, as they hadn't done well in a village society. They were harmless enough out here. Kennes and Willa, Tourbey and his growing family, were among the non-violent sort. There was also Essen, who lived in the upper north east of his uncle's domain. His ramshackle dwelling place was only one example of how strange he could be. He talked like a shaman without any ground, and made the strangest wooden or stone pieces of artwork Hero had ever seen. Nightmare, fantastical, or incredibly lovely versions of demon protective talismans on large and small scales. Hero took some to sell in larger cities. Priests thought them fantastic as grotesqueries that worked as well as the names they gave babies. Essen had been outlawed because he scared women and children. Everyone was happier with Essen living on his own in the middle of nowhere. Hero ignored the price on Essen's head.

One of the few charms Hero wore was made by him: a strange face on a medallion. Halsmuddhet had once frowned over it as he turned it over with his boney hands, looked at it and

then, as if surprised, said, “It has no magic whatsoever, except art.” Hero thought it an excellent reason for wearing it, since everyone else who had ever commented on it thought it filled with power and protection.

Few people travelled at random in the northern reaches of Codhu’s domain—except Hero. Market days in Meyrin were set by the clocks of priests. The only other random travelers were tinkers and iron-mongers, who did try to follow the market schedule as best as they could. Except for two strange deaths he heard nothing alarming. Hero reviewed the list of known outlaws in his area he had not spoken to, plus those further south towards his uncle’s town. He knew he had to talk with the other four Seekers who wandered in the woods under Codhu’s authority, or those under another war chief to the west, in Gaudenfalls. As far as he knew winter had been quiet across the northern region of Ismerin, from east to west—except for Haidez and Faulen’s strange death.

With nothing better to do, and with Spring beginning to show signs of emerging, Hero decided that it was time to make a trip to a Place of Eyes, and to visit Halsmuddhet. Gathering up grain for the trip, and to give the old man, Hero had made his way west. He asked questions to all priests and headmen along the way, but the news was the same for the most part. He did hear some strange rumors, but without details, it was hard to connect them with the strange deaths. If even the priest in the village nearest Haidez and Faulen’s home had no vision of the trouble at the smelter’s house, then perhaps a shaman would know something.

Halsmuddhet *was* legendary. He *was* mystical. He knew the world was larger than their country. But the man was more than just a shaman, one who had known the King before he’d become King; he’d seen more of the world than even the sailing merchants the King employed. Hopefully he would have answers.