

FANTASTIC ART AND STORIES FROM

THE DARK NORTH.

Foreword by
CLIVE BARKER

Written by
MARTIN DUNELIND

Artwork by
**PETER BERGTING
HENRIK PETTERSSON
JOAKIM ERICSSON
MAGNUS OLSSON
LUKAS THELIN**

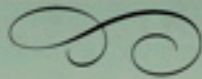




VII

I drive deeper into the woods. The engine of my Oldsmobile growls
and we hurtle down the road. The car is a reassuring piece of
my reality, accompanying me on this quest for answers.
My father gave it to me on my twentieth birthday. He burned his hand
welding years before and couldn't grip a steering wheel anymore.
The car had been hidden under a tarp in the garage for years.
Better if someone keeps it alive, he said.

A figure stands by the side of the road, watching me as I approach.
Raises a hand as if in greeting. I haven't seen anyone else for hours.
A hitchhiker? Out here? A feeling of unease and I decide not to stop.
I floor it and feel the Oldsmobile respond. We shoot past the figure,
my trusty car and I. For a second I glimpse a pale face.
A smile on thin lips.



XII


The old woman turns her head and sniffs the air.
Exposes broken teeth in a smile. "Someone outside
to meet you," she says. "A kindred soul."

I step outside. A great wolf moves up the road. As it comes closer
I can see it is far from the powerful creature it must have been once.
Wounds old and new cut across its body. Patches of fur are missing.
It limps up to me and looks at me with familiar eyes.

This is my dog, Sköld. I don't know how but I know it to be true.
His skin bears the claw marks and burns inflicted on him by the
ash wraiths. My dog. My protector. All these years he has been
protecting me. I embrace him. Hold him close.

"Thank you," I whisper. He limps back into the woods.



The illustration is a dark, atmospheric scene. On the left, a massive, carved stone face of a creature with multiple mouths and sharp teeth looms out of the shadows of a forest. The creature's mouths are open in a scream, with yellow eyes glowing. In the center-right, a spectral woman with a head of white flames and flowing white robes stands on a path. She has a pale, ethereal face and is looking towards the stone creature. The background is a dark, misty forest with tall, thin trees. The overall mood is one of horror and mystery.

On nights when the moon is full, the sick and the dying walk up the steep hill to the great stones on the edge of the forest. It is a ritual as old as the stones. There is hope to be found there, the elders say. Hope for those who have no hope left. *Valdis* waits for them. As the moonlight touches the rocks around her, they twist and contort. Cracks widen and stretch, birthing eyes and teeth, and a low moan rises. But her visitors do not shy away. They

come closer, bowing their heads, now searching for hope. Sometimes *Valdis* reaches out and lets her spectral hand touch one of the supplicants. Her touch turns flesh to stone, and the certainty of an agonizing death into the possibility of agonizing servitude. Servitude until the End. Those blessed remain, bound to her service, bound to the stones. The others stumble back down the hill. The slopes below are littered with their bones.

CHAPTER 3

*Think not that any god can ever die,
He walks beside you, but you shield your eye.
He bears no spear, nor wears a purple gown.
But by his deeds a god might be made known.
It is a rule unbroken, be advised: when gods are
on the earth, they go disguised*



*Hjalmar Gullberg,
The Disguised God*

We stood by the tree, Hangatýr and I, and waited. The sun rose and set. I thought about my wife and son, and how these events would affect them. It was a fleeting thought. The sun rose and set. Days passed. Weeks. An age.

Finally I heard it. A deep sound, building from a low rumble to a deafening roar. A wind ripped through the woods around us and shook the ash tree. The ravens took flight, shrieking.

"The gold-toothed god blows the horn," said a hoarse voice next to me.

I looked over at Hangatýr. He was leaning heavily on a spear. His beard had grown long and wild, and his face was pale and haggard.

"I envy you," he said, wheezing heavily between words. "I have not enjoyed Idunn's apples for a very long time, and the years have not been kind to me. You are fortunate."

The horn sounded again. Clouds whipped by overhead.

"I must go, son of the sea," Hangatýr said. "The jötnar come. I must go and face the wolves. You have your own duties."

BLOOD ON MY HANDS.
BLOOD ON MY TEETH.
BLOOD ON THE GROUND.

“YES, OFFICER, HE STRUCK FIRST.
YES, OFFICER, IT WAS SELF-DEFENSE.”

SATED. FOR NOW.

